

**Don't Die
Wondering**

Stunning photographic portraits of
Happy Clapper by Sarah Ebbett.
(Courtesy Sarah Ebbett Photography)



The
Pat Webster Story

Don't Die Wondering

“From a drover’s son to a Group 1 winning
trainer ... and a champion called
Happy Clapper”

As told to Alan J. Whiticker



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Gerry Harvey

I started in the horse racing business back in 1972, and I have been giving people horses to train ever since. I spread my horses with about fifty trainers across Australia and New Zealand, when most people in my position have just one main trainer.

I'll never do that. I'm an equal opportunity owner.

Theo Green was one of the first trainers I approached to train for me, and he recommended a hungry young Randwick trainer named Pat Webster. That would have been at the end of the 1970s.

My wife Katie Page says I'm attracted to people who have an interesting story because I listen to them and give them a go when other people don't. Pat is a good example of that.

Pat Webster has always been one of my favourite trainers, if not my favourite. He's a good bloke and 100 per cent trustworthy. I would never expect him to tell me something about a horse that wasn't exactly what he thought. He has always been upfront like that.

That's why I've given him horses for forty years now. We've had a lot of good horses in that time, but no champions. That's okay; it's not the end of the day.

But I always have high expectations because I think Pat is as good a trainer as anyone in the game. And the good thing is, he now has Happy Clapper to prove it.

Pat is a self-made man. When you get to know him, you realise he didn't have the advantages others may have had in life, and yet he's made the most of his talents. He's also a great role model for others and a wonderful ambassador for racing.

We need people like Pat in racing because he has the ability to influence others, especially in his mentoring of young jockeys. The most satisfying thing in life is developing people around you and seeing them do well, and Pat is no different in the work he does on and off the track.

Everyone in racing is genuinely happy for Pat's Group 1 success with Happy Clapper. He's been working with horses all his life and the universal opinion is: good on him. Well done, mate.

The Pat Webster story is a great Australian success story.

Pat's Story

Pat Webster was not a happy man.

Michael Thomas, the breeder-owner of the best horse in Pat's stable, had just informed the veteran Randwick horse trainer that he was transferring the immensely talented but injury prone gelding Thankgodyou'rehere to another stable.

Not that Michael Thomas was unhappy with Webster's meticulous, hands-on approach with the horse. Thankgodyou'rehere had won eight races and over half a million dollars in prizemoney under Pat's guidance. No, the main reason for shifting the horse to Melbourne was that his new trainer Peter Morgan operated a state-of-the-art water-walker. This one piece of equipment could potentially solve the gelding's ongoing leg problems.

Pat had been in the game long enough to know that losing horses to rival trainers, including the good ones, was part of the deal. But this was different.

'It was 2011 and I was in a training partnership with my son Wayne at the time. Thankgodyou'rehere was special to us ... it was like losing one of the family.'

But there was a sweetener. 'Michael phoned to tell me I was losing the horse, and in the next breath he says, "but I'm going to give you a two-year old I bred". When I asked him what the breeding was, he said the horse was by Teofilo, which I had never heard of, from his mare Busking.'

The rising two-year-old was promptly sent up to Webster's farm at Kulnura

on the NSW Central Coast. The horse walked off the float and Pat was far from impressed. 'I put it in the top paddock and I said to my wife, Chrissy, "Well, we've lost a good horse and got a donkey!"'

Days later, Pat had to go to the races so he placed the Teofilo gelding in a lower paddock. 'When I came home from the races Chrissy said, "You know that donkey you were talking about? We'll it's a fast donkey". He was running around the paddock and he could go!'

The Teofilo-Busking colt was named Happy Clapper. Not only would the horse change Pat's life, giving him that elusive Group 1 success all racing trainers desire, but it would also allow him to parlay a lifetime of hard work and industry goodwill into reaching out and helping others. A mentor to young jockeys through his work with Racing NSW, and an ambassador to country racing through the Racing Mates initiative, Pat has a determination to give something back to a sport that has provided him with so much.

'Happy Clapper's success has helped me enormously', Pat says. 'I've been able to do a lot of good with my work with drugs and alcohol counselling because the Clapper put me on the map and gave me a platform to talk to people in need.'

Helping others in the racing community has kept him humble. 'I can go and spend half a day with an ice addict and that will bring me pretty much down to earth, don't you worry about that.'

Pat Webster has come a long way in his almost seven decades on the planet. From a poor beginning in country New South Wales to apprentice jockey and Group 1-winning trainer, the laconic Webster is widely respected by the racing industry. Not only for what he has achieved in his roles on the racetrack, but also because of the work he does behind the scenes.

The great irony of his racing career is that Pat waited all his professional life to get his champion horse, only to have Happy Clapper's achievements potentially overshadowed by the deeds of the great mare, Winx. But that underestimates the determination of the trainer, who took on the might of

Winx eleven times in Group 1 races and watched his horse finish second to her time and time again.

‘There are champions and there are freaks,’ he would tell the racing media, ‘but Winx is a freak’.

In guiding his giant gelding to success, Pat has shown his skill as an astute horseman with the patience of Job. Happy Clapper has amassed almost \$7 million in prizemoney for owner-breeder Michael Thomas, and is the only horse to have won the ‘Big Three’ mile races at Randwick – the Villiers Stakes, The Epsom Handicap and the time-honoured Doncaster Mile.

‘The Clapper’ has captured the imagination of the racing public and forged his own place in racing folklore. So has Pat Webster.

With a bush upbringing where you ‘had to be twice as tough as the elements’, Pat found success the hard way. The following newspaper profile from the early 1980s when he was a struggling young trainer reads like a movie script:

He could ride before he could walk; he drove 4000 sheep before he was ten. At age twelve, his mother passed away and he entered full stable life in the desire to become an apprentice jockey. He rode his first winner at age fourteen – using a dodgy birth certificate – and became one of the most promising young jockeys in the Western Districts. In Sydney, he was apprenticed to Bernie Byrnes at Randwick and won at Randwick on his first ride there ... (but) before the age of twenty, his career came crashing down when he badly broke his leg in a race fall at Rosehill.

Pat made a brief comeback, even returning to the bush origins to ride, but the constant wasting was too much of a sacrifice. Married at age twenty-one, with a young wife and son to support, he worked as a track rider, an

advertising rep for a national newspaper, a wharf labourer and a porter for Ansett before starting out as a horse trainer in 1978.

Horses were in his blood. ‘The old-timers use to say you would have to have horse shit on the brain to be in this game,’ Pat says, ‘but once you’ve got it, you’ve got it’.

The Webster stable had its measure of success at Randwick, but with a small stable he had to work harder than some to make ends meet. Pat was not a punter, but he knew how to get a horse ready for a plunge and attracted owners who liked to have a bet on the right horse. The stable punched above its weight and the rewards came quickly – the ‘Clive Comet’ sting in the early 1980s even allowed him and his young family to buy a larger house in fashionable Kensington.

Wife Chrissy made a home for him and their three children, something country hardman ‘Spider’ Webster and wife Blanche had struggled to do for Pat and his older sisters in country Inverell. Pat and Chrissy’s kids went to good schools in the Eastern Suburbs and had an education he could only have imagined. All the while, the Websters looked for business opportunities to better their life – a pork ribs shop, a liquor store, a farm up in Mudgee.

Their motto is ‘don’t die wondering’. Take a chance. Have a go.

When trainer Theo Green retired in 1988, Webster inherited the majority of his stable including the Group performer At Sea. That horse’s success proved to the racing fraternity, and to Pat, that he had the talent to train a good horse. He thought that Ab Initio and Thankgodyou’rehere would finally give him that elusive Group 1 success, but both horses were dogged by bad luck in big races.

And then Happy Clapper came into his life and everything changed, except the long hours, the hard work and the sleepless nights worrying about his horses. That had always been part of Pat’s life.

As ‘The Clapper’ started his winning run on the way to capturing the 2015 Group 2 Villiers Stakes, only to be swamped by the Winx juggernaut, Pat’s

laidback approach and bush humour resonated with the racing media and the Australian public. There was something of the 'Aussie battler' about the veteran trainer that people liked.

'Life just doesn't throw up good stuff, you have to take the bad too', Pat admitted in a recent interview. 'But not many people know what we've been through. They see the headlines – and it looks like it's all beer and celebrations – but there's actually something much deeper going on that many people don't know about.'

Until now, that is.

A huge part of Pat and Chrissy's life that hasn't been publicly known was the twenty-year battle they waged, along with other members of their family, with their eldest son's drug addiction. Patrick Jnr stumbled into drugs as a teenager and has only just come out of that long hell. It had a profound effect on all of their lives and informed many of the hard decisions they had to make along the way. The most important of these was to raise Patrick's son, Jack, as their own.

Perhaps that was why Peter V'landys, the chief executive of Racing NSW, asked Pat to take on the role of mentor to young jockeys who are struggling with the ups and downs of the racing game ... too much money, the influence of 'new' friends and the prevalence of drugs – especially alcohol and methamphetamines. Part of Pat's role is to travel the state and talk to jockeys about success and failure in the most fickle and unforgiving of sports.

Pat was keen to help from the outset and is now an accredited Racing NSW drug and alcohol counsellor. Similarly when Racing Mates, a peer support initiative established by Racing NSW in 2016, appointed several ambassadors across NSW, Pat was one of the first to be recruited. Ambassadors are available when industry participants in the bush – trainers, jockeys, stable hands – need someone to talk to.

'There is nothing better than talking to someone who understands where you're coming from', Pat says.

Through the Webster family's generosity and honesty, they shared these stories with me over many visits to their family property at Kulnura on the New South Wales Central Coast. What shone through is Pat's devotion to his family, his love of the horses in his care – the slow ones *and* the champions – and his commitment to the wider racing community.

'My main motivation in life is to challenge myself. Everything I have achieved has come from nothing – I saw the hardship my parents went through and the question I constantly asked myself over the years was: could I make myself into something?'

Pat Webster has made a life for himself and his family, and much, much more.

Don't Die Wondering is his story.

Alan Whiticker, August 2019

Inverell

Situated in northern New South Wales, on the Macintyre River close to the Queensland border, Inverell could be viewed as one of those typical Australian country towns popularised by artist Darcy Doyle ... a picture on your wall of barefoot kids playing cricket on a dirt road outside a weatherboard corner store with a 'Bushell's' sign emblazoned in large letters on the side. But the harsh reality of the post-war country town was somewhat different.

Inverell has always been farming, sheep and cattle territory. But in the 1950s, the river that winds its way through the town divided it into two distinct halves, perhaps best described as the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. Wealthy graziers, the town's business folk and the well-to-do lived on one side of the river, while the other side was reserved for the town's transient workforce, assorted carnival workers and stockmen ... and the local indigenous community. They were the 'dirt poor', literally.

Patrick John Webster was born there on 19 February 1951. 'We lived on the corner of Medora Street. The other road was a dirt track which led to the local racecourse, funny enough. On race mornings, my mother would stand on the corner of our block hosing down the road so the dust wouldn't come into our house from the cars driving to the races.'

To say Pat's father, Leslie Arthur Webster, was something of a local legend in Inverell is an understatement. Even today, walk into any pub in the district, as Pat and his family have done over the years, and the name 'Spider' Webster still means something ... not just because he was a tough

bastard, Pat says, but because of all the people he helped in the community. Spider was a drover, part-time horse trainer and, later, a stock and station agent, buying and selling cattle. He also ran his own transport business for a time, but always had a horse or two in training, forever chasing a dollar at a time when a dollar was bloody hard to get.

As Pat tells the story, his father didn't go off to World War II because he had a misgrown toe that overlapped another on one of his feet. 'He wanted to go, even though he was married and my older sister Fay had been born, because the country was coming out of the Great Depression and a job was hard to find at the best of times. But he couldn't march, let alone run for his life, and so he stayed in Inverell.'

Spider Webster met Pat's mother, Blanche Alena May Burns, at a dance in Pitt Street, Redfern sometime in the mid-1930s. His mother's people originally came from Casino, but Pat doesn't know too much about that side of the family tree. His sister Lesley was the family historian and, sadly, she passed away not that long ago. Fay, some ten years older than Pat, has also passed.

'Thank God mum and dad decided to try for a boy,' Pat laughs, 'or there would be no bloody story to tell'. He was simply called 'The Baby' by his mother and sisters.

At the height of the Depression, Spider Webster was down in Sydney on the lookout for a good horse to take back to Inverell when he met his future wife. Blanche was smitten, and Spider was able to entice her back to Inverell with little more than a promise of a future together. They were battlers, survivors.

'When we lived in Inverell, Mum and Dad would go ballroom dancing at the local hall, wearing a large number pinned on their backs just like the professionals. My older sisters would take me there to watch them through the hall window ... and they were pretty bloody good dancers too!'

Before he left Sydney, Spider was drinking with Kevin Spain, who had the contract to transport horses from the stables to the track for the morning

workouts and again on race day. 'Kevin Spain was a lovely man; a real gentleman who was still transporting horses around tracks when I became an apprentice jockey in Sydney in the 1960s', Pat says. 'Dad told him how bad things were in the bush and Kevin said he would lease him a horse named Balmoral and gave £20 as a start. He even offered Dad a lift to the station so he could catch the train back to Inverell.'

Blanche Burns went with him.

The Webster family lived very simply. 'We had dirt floors in our house. People today might think we lived in the dirt, but the clay floor hardened like concrete and polished up like marble. After a pretty bad hail storm, we had sugar bags hanging in the windows instead of glass, and we owned an old fridge with a gaslight underneath.'

Pat promised his mother that he would buy her a modern electric fridge when he made it as a jockey. 'Mum didn't live long enough for me to buy her that fridge,' Pat trails off, before adding with a smile, 'but I did end up training for Gerry Harvey, the greatest fridge salesman in the world'.

People never worried too much about money back then because they had so little of it. The only time one of the kids found a spare penny or thrippence was if they pulled it out of one of Blanche's plum puddings at Christmas. She would save all year to make it, and made sure everyone got a piece.

Pat loves telling young jockeys the story about only owning one pair of shoes when he was a boy. 'And they were my school shoes', he adds. The three Webster children had to go out barefoot each morning and milk the family cow, Saucepan, and her calf Buttercup before they went to school. 'In winter there would be so much frost on the ground as soon as you saw the cow drop a "patty", you would put your feet in the shit to keep them warm.'

But the Websters were optimists at heart, even in the bleakest of times. 'One of the good things that happened when the river flooded was Dad would shoot a duck and bring it home for dinner.'

Life was hard in the bush, and often unforgiving. Riding the bus home

from school, Pat would sit on a small box beside the bus driver. 'My mate Terry Creer got off at the stop before me. [One day] when he went inside his home his father was lying on the floor with a gunshot wound to his head. He'd committed suicide.'

By the time Pat got off the bus, Terry was running up the road towards him, calling out, 'Patty, Patty. Come home with me. Something's wrong'.

'We opened the door and his father was lying there, covered in blood', Pat recalls. 'It was a lot to take in for a couple of nine-year-olds, let me tell you. I remember Terry's father was wearing high-heeled riding boots. You don't see many people wearing those types of boots these days.' Pat is still in contact with Terry Creer, who remains another old mate from his hometown.

'Terry's mother married a local publican, so he and his sister were very well looked after and had a good life.' Only recently Pat learned that Terry's father had borrowed Spider's gun to take his own life. 'I suppose it was just all too much for the poor bloke. There were no support agencies in those days.'

Suicide was an unspoken epidemic in many parts of the bush. In many ways, it still is.

But Pat has mainly fond memories of his childhood. 'When the circus came to town one year, the rumour went around that a black panther had escaped and was "knocking off" sheep in the district. We'd be driving along a country road and Dad would tell me to look up in the trees and see if I could see that black panther. It wasn't until years later that I learned that the "black panther" was more of the two-legged variety.'

Sheep and cattle duffing were rife in a time when people struggled for survival. 'When Dad said that he was heading out to "the long paddock", he would invariably come home with a slaughtered lamb or sheep to share with everyone.'

Spider Webster was barely one step in front of the law. 'The police would come to our house looking for Dad. Mum would stand at the door and say,

“I haven’t seen him myself for weeks, officer. When you find him, tell him he’s months behind in his child support”. Dad, of course, would be sitting in the kitchen sipping a cup of tea.’

Closing time at local pubs was 6 pm sharp, and each night Blanche would tell the children that it ‘wouldn’t be long now before your father gets home for dinner’ (10 o’clock closing came in in 1957). Men drank ‘middies’ of beer and women drank ‘sevens’ of shandies – a mixture of lemonade and beer. A hardy few drank schooners, often to excess.

Pat’s father could drink with the best of them and back it up if needed. Some nights, Spider would come home from the pub with the knuckles on both his hands red raw. ‘Mum would sit beside his bed and bathe his hands with saltwater, and then tell me to do the same.’

But living up to his reputation in town would prove Spider’s downfall.

‘When I was really young,’ Pat says, ‘Dad fought a bloke out the back of the local hotel and the bloke hit his head on the ground and later died. Dad did a couple of years in gaol for manslaughter for that’. Pat is short on the details, because he was so young when it happened, and it’s part of the family history best not dwelt upon. Spider Webster never did.

Being the baby of the family, and the only boy, Pat was doted on by his mother. By his own admission, he was a mother’s boy and could do no wrong. His older sisters, though, kept him in line. ‘Fay used to take me to the shops and if I tried “chucking a sook”, she would sick her cattle dog Boomi onto me. I’d quickly fall into line ... that damn dog did everything she told it to.’

When he was about ten years old, Pat contracted hepatitis and was seriously ill for several months. ‘The girl who lived next door to us had hepatitis and I remember Mum saying not to go inside their house. The girl was getting better, though, and her mum suggested I come in and play draughts with her to keep her company.’ Pat ended up contracting the disease and was desperately ill.

Pat was in a hospital isolation ward for almost three months and lost a hell

of a lot of weight. ‘The doctors and nursing staff wore masks when they treated me, and Mum and my sisters could only visit me looking through a screen door. I was a terrible shade of yellow, and I couldn’t eat any dairy food after that – I still can’t eat butter. I came out of quarantine a skinny kid and that’s when I decided to become a jockey.’

One day, Pat’s father came home and informed everyone that he’d bought the boy a pony. ‘My best mate Jack Dixon had a piebald pony which he called Chips, and my pony was a grey I called Tarpot. Jack and me did everything together as boys ... we were like brothers. We rode our ponies all day, bareback of course because we didn’t have any money for saddles, often stopping off at the river banks to play soldiers or look for an ant’s nest to destroy.’

‘Pat was a villain’, Jack Dixon recalls. Now retired after working more than fifty years in the local abattoir, Jack stills lived in Inverell, having married and raised a family there. ‘He was a rogue, as was I. You had to be to survive in the bush. Our fathers were drovers together, and Pat’s mother Blanche was like a second mum to me. I would often stay and have dinner with the Websters and head off home when it was dark. It was just a different era.’

The boys made their own entertainment and created their own mischief. ‘We could have been killed a hundred times over’, Jack says.

One on such adventure, Pat almost drowned in the Macintyre River. ‘I was about eight or nine,’ Pat remembers ruefully, ‘and I jumped in, which I shouldn’t have’. The current was moving quickly and a local Aboriginal boy named Lance Bartholomew from Tinga dived in and pulled him over onto a riverbank. Pat admits that they didn’t have a lot to do with the black community back then, before adding, ‘but I’d love to see him again and shake his hand. If it wasn’t for him, I wouldn’t be here’.

On the Websters’ side of the McIntyre River, Inverell was mostly a flat flood plain. Drovers who came to town would often camp there in open paddocks and let their horses graze there while they hit the pubs in town. First thing the next morning, Jack and Pat would muster all the saddle

horses for the drovers, hoping they would get a small tip.

The sales yards were at one end of the racecourse, and Pat and Jack would head up there and ride the calves for a bit of fun on a Friday night when the sales were on. 'We'd nearly get ourselves killed because they had steel yards in those days – with unpadding steel gates. I don't know why we did it, just to be naughty I suppose.'

When the Inverell Show came around every year, Pat and Jack would ride the poddy calves out of the cattle shoot to the cheers of the crowd. During the Grand Parade of Champions in the main showring, they formed the great idea of greasing a pig and letting it loose among the livestock and horses. 'It created havoc.' Pat remembers it clearly as being an orange pig with large black patches. The boys hid under the grandstand and nobody ever did find out who let the pig loose. 'There would have been hell to pay', he says.

Pat had learned to box at the local Police Boys Club. At the Show, Jack and Pat would make a track to Jimmy Sharman's Boxing Tent. The fighters would be out the front of the tent, banging the drum and calling out, 'come inside and go a pound a round'. Pat and Jack would hop inside the ring – being the sons of 'local legends' known for riding their ponies around town gave them enough notoriety for Sharman to give them a go.

'We were only boys,' Pat says, 'but we'd have a really good go, flogging each other or some other kid, black or white, and then clean up all the sixpences and shillings the punters through into the ring and then go and spend it at the show. It was good money, too!' Tellingly, on one occasion, Pat asked his mate Jack to let him win a fight because Spider was watching in the wings. The friends shared the money 50/50 anyway.

Living every boy's dream, Pat and Jack started to ride their ponies to school each day. 'I would let Tarpot lose in a vacant paddock next to the corner store opposite the school. I would throw a towel on the pony's back so I wouldn't get my school shorts stained with horse sweat. My mate Jack went to the local Catholic School in town because he was more of a Catholic than I was. The horse would pick all day in the paddock and then I'd ride

him home from school.'

Horses, and horse racing, were an important part of the local community. Some local trainers had large stables and there was always a race meeting on the weekend, if not at Inverell, at local towns such as Warialda, Bingara or Moree. 'Mum loved getting dressed up and going to the Inverell races with her friend, Sheila Lawrence, the wife of local jockey Pat Lawrence. A great little rider named "Skeeter" Kelly used to stay with us over the Christmas carnival. He was later killed in a race fall at Glen Innis.'

Trainer George Sinclair would come to Inverell every Christmas with a team of a dozen or so horses and stay at the local showgrounds. 'Dad would say that we were going down to see your Uncle George, and the smell of liniment being rubbed on the horses' legs would almost knock you over. Trainers today don't use liniment to treat horses but that smell takes me straight back to those days.'

One year, one of Sinclair's fillies was set for a maiden race at Inverell; the team had put a lot of work into the horse and it duly saluted. 'I have a funny suspicion this was the same meeting the swab hut caught fire', says Pat. Someone lit the straw placed on the ground to soak up the spillage when the horses provided their post-race urine samples. No swabs were taken that day.

'Perhaps it was just a coincidence', he laughs.

With Spider Webster, it was either feast or famine as far as horse training was concerned. He won a Moree Cup and a Warialda Cup and lots of minor races, but the most he ever had in training was six horses. 'He was not a professional trainer, like today,' Pat says, 'but he was always looking to get a horse fit so he could get a win and earn a quid or two'.

When Spider had a big win, the family would go to Jo Mah's Chinese Restaurant in town. 'As a boy, it was like going to Star Casino and seeing Kerry Packer there', Pat says. 'Everyone who was anyone in town would be there on a Saturday night.' Country life is different from the 'big smoke', he says. 'Everyone knew everyone.'

A Drover's Son

It was about this time Pat was introduced to show jumping after joining the local pony club, which was run by the McGregor family. There he learned horsemanship, patience and humility. Early on, the group of young riders were told to put their ponies in a large paddock for the night and to water them in readiness for a parade through town the next day. Pat put Tarpot in an adjoining paddock that already had water in it, but during the night his grey pony rolled around in the mud and was more brown than grey when Pat turned up the next morning to ride him through the main street.

'There was not time to wash him,' Pat rues, 'so Mr McGregor made me ride a dirty horse through town. It was quite embarrassing really because everyone knew me'. It was an early life lesson for the future jockey and trainer. No cutting corners.

But the McGregors saw something they liked in the young rider. They recruited Pat as their star junior rider and taught him the ins and outs of show jumping. They also had access to the best show horses in the district, especially 'flag racing' horses. 'All you had to do was sit on them and the horse did all the work', Pat says modestly. 'Going from a pony to a horse was amazing. They were big strong bastards with a great turn of foot.'

The McGregors kept the prizemoney ('Not that much,' remembers Pat, 'just enough to feed the horses and make ends meet'). Pat collected the ribbons, and lots of them. 'I won a lot of ribbons, which my wife says I should be proud of', Pat says. His mother made them into a rug for him, which he still has, and he is certainly proud of that.

But the horses, Pat maintains, were the real stars.

In the 1960s, the stock routes used for droving sheep and cattle to market were still an open range, especially in northern New South Wales and southeastern Queensland. This was years before routes were cut off by farm fencing and the urban sprawl from the larger townships. Trucks were still a scarcity, so drovers were employed to drive stock to sales yards in the tried and tested Australian way immortalised in such films as *The Sundowners* and *The Shiralee*, and the poetry of Henry Lawson ('The Ballad of the Drovers') and Banjo Patterson ('In the Droving Days').

Spider Webster was many things to many people, but he prided himself on his skill as a drover. Work was hard to come by, however, and he would disappear for weeks on end trying to earn a quid. He had dabbled with truck transport since the mid-1950s, and learned to handle a truck on the long treks to market, packed with sheep or cattle, but the old ways were still the best.

In the winter of 1963, Spider took a huge gamble and invested all he had in droving 4000 sheep from Inverell to Goondiwindi, a large town on the northern side of the NSW-Queensland border that would later be immortalised as the home of the great grey galloper, Gunsynd. It was the sort of gamble where a small fortune could be made, and the fate of an entire family could turn on the toss of a coin.

Young Pat was in his first year of high school when his father told him he could either stay in school and be cared for by his sisters, or come droving with him and his mother. His oldest sister Fay was already married and

Lesley had left school to start work in a local store. 'I didn't have to think twice about it. I hated school and longed to be outdoors. The only thing I liked about school was playing rugby league for the school team. I couldn't leave quick enough.'

It would also come at an important time in Pat's young life, and in the married life of his parents, although he didn't know that then. Pat's mum was in the early stages of an illness that would claim her life within twelve months.

'Mum and dad slept in a caravan while I camped in the back of the truck with several indigenous lads who came along with us on the drive.' The best part of the drive, as he remembers it, was his mother cooking in a camp oven every night. 'The other guys were pretty good bush cooks too, but they weren't a patch on mum.'

The drive would take a couple of months and Pat was expected to complete school by correspondence, picking up packages of lessons mailed to local post offices along the way. 'The indigenous blokes were a lot smarter than me and they ended up doing most of my school work.'

The Aboriginal stock hands also taught Pat how to better control a horse by riding on a 'long' rein. 'Horses were just so relaxed for them, they just responded really well to the balance of their bodies', Pat says. 'We want to rein horses in tight, but they were just casual, athletic riders.' They could roll a cigarette with one hand, get a box of matches out of their top pocket, light the cigarette and still have control of the horse with the other hand, Pat observed, although he never mastered that particular trick.

'They were young blokes in their twenties or early thirties', Pat remembers. 'Lovely guys, happy go lucky.' But old biases still operated in the bush. When the drive approached a country town, Spider would camp outside the district for the night. Only then would he go into town to buy a few longnecks of beer, and bring them back to share with the others because he was afraid that if the stockmen went to town and hit the pubs, they wouldn't come back.

'Dad really believed that,' says Pat, 'but he had the drive to think about. It was a huge gamble for him.'

During the drive, the family's caravan tipped over and locals from town helped the Websters get back on their feet. 'I remember a Father O'Brien helped us, so Spider said to him, "Seeing you helped me, Father, would you Christen my lad?" The priest threw some water on me, then and there, and it was all done. I didn't get a say in it.'

This was no Hollywood movie or sentimental bush poem. This was real life, and the harsh reality of the Australian bush was never far away. Halfway through the drive, the ewes birthed their lambs. If they were left lagging behind on the long drive to the sales, they could just as easily fall victim to crows pecking their eyes out and wild dogs at night. The solution was just as brutal, especially for a twelve-year-old.

'The lambs were killed when they were only days old', Pat says matter-of-factly. 'The indigenous stockmen would hit them on the head with a nulla-nulla and that was that. We would leave them stacked in piles under a tree because we just had to keep going.'

Worse was to follow. Just before they came into Goondiwindi, located on the northern side of the McIntyre River which snakes its way north and forms part of the NSW-Queensland border, the sheep came down with a disease colloquially called 'yellow big head'. Rams butting heads in a large herd are susceptible to a virus (cholangiopathy), which spreads quickly through the ewes, inflaming their head and neck area, and making them look jaundiced and act erratically.

Pat still remembers that day clearly. 'As we were going across this bridge with the river flowing under it, the sheep were jumping to their deaths because the disease had made them crazy. We were just on the outskirts of Goondiwindi when he lost much of the stock. We had been on the road for so long and to see the sheep jumping into the river really broke my dad. These deaths knocked the numbers about and he finished up losing money on the drive.'

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