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Abstract
My ancestors were involved with racehorses long before they immigrated to Australia in the early 1800s. Two brothers, Andrew and James Kerr came from Ayeshire, Scotland in 1825. They had been raised on an estate named Wellwood by parents who toiled there as poor tenant farmers. This property was owned by the famous horse owner, the Fifth Duke of Portland.

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My Ride On An Ozzie Icon

Doreen Borrow

My ancestors were involved with racehorses long before they immigrated to Australia in the early 1800s. Two brothers, Andrew and James Kerr came from Ayeshire, Scotland in 1825. They had been raised on an estate named *Wellwood* by parents who toiled there as poor tenant farmers. This property was owned by the famous horse owner, the Fifth Duke of Portland.

Following their arrival in the colonies the brothers settled in the Lachlan Valley of New South Wales and acquired land where they raised cattle and sheep. Later they and their descendants owned, bred and raced thoroughbred horses. They won many races in the district, and later generations raced ponies at the now defunct Rosebery and Ascot tracks in Sydney. Most, if not all, were gamblers and discussions as to the merits of certain gallopers were an everyday part of my life.

When the Kerrs lived in the Lachlan valley the Forbes racing club mounted an unsuccessful campaign to have them banned from racing on the grounds that they carried the convict stain. James Kerr married a convict woman, Isabella Renshaw, in Van Diemans Land before joining his older brother in the Bathurst District. Isabella had been sentenced to seven years penal servitude for her part in relieving a man of five shillings. My great grand father, Thomas Walker, whose daughter married into the family, was the son of convicts. His father Joseph Walker had, at the age of twelve, been sentenced to be transported for life for his participation in the Irish uprising of 1798. Thomas' mother, Frances Hardcastle had been sentenced to death for burglary and transported to NSW for fourteen years. The Squattocacy of the Lachlan district did not take kindly to such people mingling with the pure merinos in the owners' enclosure at the race club.

We were living at 99 Doncaster Avenue Kensington, Sydney in 1928. sharing the home of other relations pending Dad's next "get rich quick" venture. Before that we lived at Goolagong, where Dad and his brother Jack owned a pub. This small town was

situated on the Lachlan River, and was a stopover on one of the major stock routes criss-crossing New South Wales. The coming of the railways brought advantages to many small towns, but had an adverse affect on the pub trade at Goolagong. Droving declined as more and more stock were transported by rail. The drovers who penned cattle and sheep in the stockyards opposite his pub, and quenched their thirst there, left the district in search of work further out. My father pulled out of the pub venture to seek profits elsewhere.

I was born on 4 October 1926, the same day as the great racehorse Phar Lap. His sire was Night Raid and his dam Entreaty. He was not a good-looking foal, and his looks had not improved much when he came up for sale at the Trentham Sales in New Zealand in January 1928. Only two bidders made offers for him and he was knocked down to Hugh Telford for 160 guineas. Hugh's brother, Harry, was impressed with Phar Lap's bloodlines, and talked David Davis, a Sydney horse owner, into putting money up for the colt.

The journey across the Tasman, in the vessel *Wangenella*, did not agree with Phar Lap. He lost condition, broke out in warts and was a very sorry sight when he arrived at Telford's stables at Doncaster Avenue. His condition was so poor when he arrived at the stables, that his owner refused to pay the training fees. Telford agreed to lease him for three years, to pay all racing expenses and give Davis a third of any prize money won. Davis must have regretted this arrangement in the beginning as well, because Phar Lap won only once in his first nine starts.

However, in his second year of racing, as a three year old, he began to demonstrate the ability that would mark him as the greatest race horse ever seen in this part of the world, and one of the best seen anywhere in the world.

In a brief career, he raced fifty one times for thirty-seven wins. After he won the Rosehill Guineas in September 1929, he went on to win 35 of his next 40 starts. So great was he, that he made front-page news when beaten. He was beaten twice in a 33 start spell from March 1930 to October 1931 (the greatest sequence of successive wins in Australia is 15). His greatest feat was in winning the Melbourne Cup of 1930 carrying 62.5 kilos. He only ever raced against the very best, and in one streak recorded fifteen successive victories.

Phar Lap was an enormous horse; he was strongly built and stood over 17 hands at the withers. He was chestnut in colour and affectionately known as the Red Terror.

Against the wishes of Telford, Davis decided to send Phar Lap to the United States. Telford's lease on Phar Lap had expired

in 1931 but Davis sold a half share to him for 4,000 pounds. This was a generous offer as, by this stage of his career, the horse was worth much more.Davis felt that he owed a debt to the trainer for having selected the horse. Due to the depression prize money had been reduced in Australia and the prospect of big dollars in the U.S attracted Davis. He loaded aboard the cargo vessel the *Ulimaroa* in Sydney and shipped via New Zealand to California with his devoted strapper Tommy Woodcock. This venture was to spell doom for the mighty red gelding.

When my family moved to Sydney they got as close to Randwick Racecourse as possible. Doncaster Avenue was the home of many trainers. The family home was across the road from where the stables of legendary trainer Tommy Smith, Tulloch Lodge, were established in the 1950. When we arrived there, most trainers were battlers. It was an era when the battler had some prospect of getting the big one up, as Tommy Smith's own story testifies.

It was during our stay at Doncaster Avenue that my tenuous link with Phar Lap was forged. My father and his brothers formed close links with those involved in the racing game. The jockey Jimmy Pike who had become a close friend of Dad's (or as Dad would say 'a good cobber') was leading Phar Lap up Doncaster Avenue and I was lifted onto the big horse's back. I held on to his mane as he was walked from the track to Telford's stables. Phar Lap was then a maiden.

After the great horse had secured his place in the pantheon of Australian icons, Dad would occasionally remark to me: 'Don't ever forget Bubsy, you have ridden the great Phar Lap'. This meant little to me at the time, but in later years I asked my mother what Dad had meant by those words and she told me the story.

I was only six when the big red horse died in San Francisco in 1932 and recall the outpouring of grief expressed, not only by those involved in racing, but the majority of Australian (and New Zealanders, too, I understand). It was an extraordinary social phenomenon, without parallel elsewhere. By the time of his death, my family were eking out a miserable existence in the mining town of Captains Flat. Another of my father's schemes had failed due to the depression and the closure of the mine, which was to be his El Dorado. At this period there were no radios and the only newspaper to reach us was *The Truth.* My Uncle Jim walked from Kensington to Central Station and back every Sunday night to post it 'late mail', for which he paid a fee of two-pence. It was then conveyed on the Cooma Mail, via the Travelling Post Office, to Bungendore. It would reach Captains Flat via Herb Daniels,

the mail contractor, the next day.

Jim Beazley, the local postmaster, conveyed the terrible news of Phar Lap's to us. He was one of the very few people in the town with access to a phone. It is difficult to convey the shock of having him arrive at our doorstep with a stricken look on his face, blurting out: 'Tom, Phar Lap is dead!' My Uncle Jim had rang from Sydney, and asked that the message be passed on to Dad. In our home, it was as though someone near and dear had died suddenly. It caused almost as much grief as had the closure of the mine.

The popular opinion then, which has passed into Australian myth, was that the horse had been poisoned by the Yanks. My father was firmly convinced of this.

Phar Lap's death remains shrouded in mystery to this day. His name still conjures up all that is good and brave in people. To have a heart as big as Phar Lap, carry more weight than Phar Lap, or to go like Phar Lap remain among the highest accolades heaped upon the most supreme champions by the older generation of Australians who remember what a great galloper he was. I recall my mate Mike using one of these expressions during a family dinner. My future son in law, being of Italian descent asked, 'Who's Phar Lap?' There was a stunned silence from all present and utter disbelief that an eighteen-year-old, born in Australia, had never heard of the great Phar Lap! It was almost enough to make us cancel the wedding!

There have been many other great gallopers bred and raced since, but none to rival the majesty of the great red horse, striding down the Flemington or Randwick straight. The combination of unparalleled greatness in the horse and abject despair in the years of the great depression, are factors that help to explain the Phar Lap phenomenon. And to think that I stroked his mane and felt his giant heart beating beneath my tiny frame before the onset of the depression years and the great horse's fame. These are cherished memories that have remained with me. I expect that I am the only person alive today, to have ridden on the back of the great horse before he became famous, but could not know for sure.