

2014 International Year of Family Farming

Feeding the world; Caring for the Earth

Family Farm Snapshots

<http://familyfarms.enviroed4all.com.au>



Crops and Livestock Farming, Jeparit

Our Family

My **wife and I** are around our 80's now. We have spent our lives family farming, mostly around the Jeparit area, in the Wimmera, where we have raised six children. Our home and farm for the last 40 years has been Roma Lee. We work it together with the help of our farm dog, Oscar. Our land is near where the Wimmera River runs into Lake Hindmarsh.

Now retiring, we enjoy living on the farm and having more time for other activities, like bowls!



Our Farm

We began our farming life about the same size acreage as we have now! We have always produced crops and livestock, and food for our own needs. As our family grew, we needed more income and grew our farm size, but none of them became farmers. We have had six properties over this time, with a maximum of 1500 acres when we provided for all six children. Some of this was as 'share' farmers, meaning that we worked land that someone else owned, e.g my father's neighbouring land.

When our children were growing up at home, we had two cows, a Jersey and a Friesian, which we milked for milk, and to make cream and butter. We grew most of the vegetables and fruit that we needed. We farmed cereals, legumes and sheep for our income. *What sort of plants do you see in this part of our garden? What do you think the poles are for?*



Now the children are grown-up, moved elsewhere and will not return to farm. We do not need as much income or land, so have sold off some land that we used to own. We have about 800 acres still where our home is. It provides enough work and income for us, but I am considering if at 80, it is time to move out of cropping and keep only a small flock of sheep to keep weeds down. The land will still be farmed as a lease or share crop.

Our farmland had three distinct types of land system types (photo right in the midst of the last drought):

- The heavy, dark Black Box clay soils, on the Wimmera River floodplains
- The Red Gum loams adjacent to the River
- The lighter sandy soils of Native Pines and wattle shrubs, of the lunettes (sandhills) adjacent to Lake Hindmarsh.

Can you find these three types in the photo?

We also have a small mine in the sandhills (photo right). It supplies sand for making concrete in Wimmera towns, giving us additional income.

The sandhills have also provided another resource – water. The lie of the land here made it impossible for Wimmera Mallee Stock and Domestic Channel System to reach here when it was built in the 20th Century. So we had to rely on our own resources for water:

- Catchment dams - collect water running from higher areas (see photo right)
- a spring in the sand hills. It flowed continuously until the Big Drought at the start of this century and has not flowed since.

In wet years, a fifth of the land could be lost to production when under water from floods along the River.

Our produce - 'Feeding the world'

Cereals and legumes are standard crops in the Wimmera, but the variety grown depends on the soils mainly. They can have different uses and new varieties are often available. In recent years, we grew:

- Scout – a white hard wheat, used to make flour for breads
- Schooner- a malting quality barley for years, but now 'downgraded' for stock feed as better varieties have been developed.
- Lupins – for stock feed

These are all carted by truck to the local silos at Jeparit. From there, they go to markets either in Australia or exported.



We have run sheep for many years. We ran Merinos for their wool until the value dropped in the 1980's. 'Fat lambs' are sheep reared for the meat trade. These brought a better return, so we crossed the Merinos with a high value meat breed, Poll Dorsets. Our Poll Dorset Rams were first class. They gave us a 120% lambing rate, and first prize in four years at the local Jeparit Agricultural Show in the last decade. We truck sheep for sale to the regional Sale Yards at Warracknabeal about 70 km away. Buyers from the domestic and export trades may come to their Wednesday stock sales by auction, so you never know what price you will get until they are sold.

Includes 'Feeding ourselves'

Our vegetable gardens have had a huge range of foods for us to eat over the years. Now, as there is only the two of us to feed, we do not need to grow as much. Some favourites are:

- carrots,
- lettuce,
- parsnips,
- pumpkins,
- turnips
- zucchini (photo right in flower)

Our fruit trees are large and mature. We preserve much of the produce for use later in the year. We also share some our produce with family and friends. There are many fruit trees around the house block, and some out on the nearest sandhill. We have:

- almonds,
- apricots,
- grape-fruit, (photo right middle)
- mandarines
- native lime
- oranges,
- pears
 - both Packham (photo right)
 - and Beurré Bosc

In the last couple of years, white ants ate the wood of the apples, peaches and apricots, killing the trees. We removed those and replanted new ones, adding

- A Lemonade Lemon - a sweeter variety of lemon which is already producing. (photo right – *Why is it still a green colour?*)



Sustainability - 'Caring for the Earth'

Our orchard trees are mostly around the house. The birds think they are here for their food too! We used noisy tin scarecrows (photo right and first page) to keep the birds away, especially the rosellas, galahs and cockies. They eat the almonds while they are soft and green, before they ripen and we haven't had any for a long time! Some birds may help us by eating insects, like this New Holland Honeyeaters in the photo below right on top of the lemon tree. They have both fruit and insects in their diet. *What shape does it's beak have? How would this help it feed?*

The vegetable garden is also close to the house. Soils here are the heavy clays. We add gypsum to make it more friable. We put on a barley straw mulch to protect the soil from evaporation and erosion and to add some fertility back into the soil as it rots.

To look after the land so that it can keep growing crops, we firstly always followed a standard 3-year crop rotation of the paddocks:

- Year 1 – wheat
- Year 2 – barley
- Year 3 – a legume , which will return Nitrogen to the soil
 - Legumes which are then turned into the soil with a disc to aid the next crop
 - Field peas or beans if the land is a bit marginal.

In dry years, e.g. 2008 in the photo right, sheep are hand-fed hay and grain. We do this on the heaviest clay soils, where their droppings add manure to the soil. Sheep are kept off the sandy soils, which are already likely to blow if they are bare to the wind.

There are several potential problems with our soils, which are common in the Wimmera:

- The sandy country is prone to wind erosion



- The sandhills were originally covered with a Native Pine (photo right). This was a great building material, used locally and further away. So that when my father brought his property next door in the 1950's, the sandhills were bare and their sandy soils were drifting badly. However the natural spring was running and the 50's was a wet period. Now the pines have pretty much recovered over the sandhills, and since the last Decade of Drought, the spring has dried up, but the wind erosion is less.
- The red soils are clay that have strong clods which harden.
 - We have added Gypsum to all the red soils on the property to make it easier for the crop roots to grow in them.
- The threat of salinity.
 - There was no hint of salt when Dad came here in the 1950's. Our blocks adjacent to the Lake's shores grew a thick Native Clover. In those days, the River ran almost freely to the Lake with the water that fell each year. But more and more storages were being built in the Grampians. The flow of the River was reduced and its timing changed. In the Decade of Drought, the Lake was mostly dry, while the River became a series of pools. As a member of Jeparit Waterwatch, monitoring the water monthly at Jeparit, we recorded these pools rise to be much more salty than the sea. When rain fell in the catchment, it mostly went into storages desperately needed to cope with the Drought. Our Lakeside land showed the effects of salinity.
 - We tried lime to reduce the salinity on this land in about 2008, but it made no noticeable improvement, nor did another product 'Miracle Dust'.
 - This land and some other patches have now been planted to Saltbush (photo right). It is a native plant which tolerates salty soils, reduces soil erosion and salinity, and can be fed on by stock.



Look at the difference in colour between Saltbush by the fence and Pine on the sand hill. What sort of creatures do you think might live in each of these plants?

The land was already cleared when we bought it. But remnant vegetation on farms is very important and there were still some large, old trees here, which we have looked after as well as planting new trees and shrubs, mainly on the sandhills.

- Big Black Boxes also tell us about where, under natural conditions, there may be a wet ground (flood) about every 20 years, since they need some deep watering, but not every flood, like the River Red Gums do.



- The Black Box is a prolific flowering gum in summer, attracting bees, and providing hollows for hives – we have a couple of native beehives in our trees. Bees are key pollinators of the crops and garden, so protecting these trees also helps our farm.
- Such big trees are a cooler place with shade for sheep to shelter on very hot days.
- Groups of trees (shelter belts) are also needed for protection for recently shorn sheep from bad weather when the weather report has a 'sheep grazer alert'.
- Native creatures also need them for homes and food. We see many creatures around our garden and farm, like:
 - a Brown Snake, occasionally
 - and many other bird species, e.g.:
 - Finches,
 - Butcher Birds,
 - Magpies,
 - Kookaburras
- Dead trees are valuable to native creatures, so this white skeleton has not been removed, and its hollows remain as homes for them.



However there is a problem in the native vegetation and on the cropland, rabbits and hares - their numbers are growing again in the Wimmera. Many different control methods have been used over the years by governments, e.g. most recently the Calicivirus. In earlier years, we used to trap rabbits and hares. They were used as a food for people and dogs. Shooting is often used to reduce their numbers without damaging the land (by ripping it up to destroy warrens) or other creatures (with poison baits).

I give my permission to Jeanie Clark for this to be used on the web under a cc licence. 14/3/2014 Written by J. Clark from interview with F. Pitt. Photos by J. Clark, except 2008 sheep feeding photo.

For more information about the IYFF go to:

<http://familyfarms.enviroed4all.com.au> for more in this series of snapshots

<http://www.fao.org/family-farming-2014/> <http://www.familyfarmingcampaign.net> for the official IYFF sites

<https://www.facebook.com/InternationalYearOfFamilyFarmingIYFF> for the facebook updates.

