



## Tom Mitchell and Racing at Towong

*'The Towong races are more than just another set of horse races, they are in many ways symbolic of Upper Murray unity and Upper Murray tradition.'*

T W Mitchell, 1943

### Early Racing

'Local race day for the Towong Cup was always a tremendous event, in fact it was the event of the year, and its importance dwarfed even such days as New Year and Christmas. No one knows the actual date and year of the first Towong races, but they were held annually on the flat two hundred feet below the [Towong Hill] house and Race Day was an event of terrific attraction in a year of hard, dull, pioneering existence practically unspiced by any other amusements.'

'The day was planned for months before and discussed round the mustering camps and in the huts and homesteads. It was more than a mere race meeting, it was a social and business gathering, a day of relaxation, of conflict, of celebration, of intoxication, and of love.'

'For some days before, the peace of the racecourse flat was broken by buggies and drays and jinkers and sulkies and horsemen arriving along the narrow earth tracks that wound erratically through congested masses of scrub. The darkness each night was punctuated by an increasing number of ruddy campfires. In the daytime a rough track was measured out and prepared. The equipment was simple, the judges' box was a red gum stump, the finish was the line between this stump and the least bent of four gum saplings opposite, and the rails of the straight were the line of logs and broken limbs that had been pulled off the course. A few saplings were trimmed to fill in the gaps and some more unbarked saplings were got together to form a saddling paddock. The lunchroom was an irregular booth of freshly cut leafy gum branches. There was no bar mainly because there were no such things as bottles or glasses, or for that matter any refinement in drinking. There was only one drink and one way of drinking it, which was to take your tin pannikin or quartpot to the rum barrels.'

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'The races had been run for a number of years on this new site [at Towong Village] before I appeared in 1906 but they were still primitive affairs and still the great social attraction of the district. I listened to the stockmen's talk of the coming event, and from the eminence of our hill watched the continuous succession of buggies and horsemen all heading in the same direction. People called at the homestead then who never came near it at any other time, and we ran countless extra meals and snacks. Everyone was in high spirits and talked and laughed loudly and nothing was mentioned except horses.

'Usually the races ended with strings of variegated horse drawn vehicles raising clouds of dust against the sunset across the plain, or sometimes a quick thunderstorm appeared and drenched the vehicle loads of weary and not strictly sober people. Sometimes, happily rarely, a column of smoke rising from behind the hills sent everybody flying to their horses and buggies, but whatever happened the district voted it a great day although of course the wrong horse always won!'

An Excerpt from T W Mitchell's unpublished memoir *Midway Peak*, 1943

