

Lance Skuthorp and the Skuthorp Family

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Lance Skuthorp Snr. was born at Kurrajong on the 15th December, 1870 and spent most of his life as a young man on the family property at Garah in northern N. S. W. He became a legend in his own lifetime, being a champion rodeo rider, a master horse trainer, a showman, a cattle drover, prize fighter, athlete, writer, and storyteller. He is acknowledged as having pioneered the rodeos and buck jumping shows that began in Australia in the late 1800s.

He is featured in several exhibits in the Stockman's Hall of Fame, Longreach, Queensland, and also in the Australian Outback Heritage Book - "The Stockman". He and the Skuthorp family are also featured throughout the Jenny Hicks book *Cowboys, Roughriders and Rodeos*.

In 1896 he performed the first of two publicity stunts that made him famous throughout Australia. After backing himself for £200 and watched by a huge crowd, including cattle king Sidney Kidman, he borrowed a horse and repeated the poet Adam Lindsay Gordon's feat of jumping a six foot fence and landing on a six foot ledge bordering on the edge of the Blue Lake of Mount Gambier.

In 1906 'Bobs' was recognised as the best buckjumper in Australia and it was claimed that no man could ride him. Lance took up the challenge and it became a much publicised event. The rivalry between the various rodeo shows enabled the publicity to continue for several weeks.

The event was finally held in Rawson Place, Sydney and was attended by a crowd of more than 3,000 people, including the Governor of the day. Lance rode 'Bobs' to a standstill and in doing so, he became a legend, reportedly winning £1,000 in prize money and wagers.

Most of the time Lance managed his own buckjumping shows, but he also worked with other shows like Wirths circus, riding buckjumpers in their lion cage. It has been said that Lance was a likeable rogue, who was rich one day and broke the next. When he sold 'Snips', a champion buckjumper for £700, he spent all the money there before heading back to the bush. This was a pattern he continued throughout his life, making a fortune, blowing it all, and then starting out again from scratch.

In 1902 he and his friend Charlie Philpott, drove a mob of 6,000 fat bullocks from the Wave Hill station in the Northern Territory, a distance of more than a 1,000 miles to Burrandilla Station, near Charleville in Queensland. There were no roads to follow, no bores to water the cattle, and the droving trip over the Spinifex plains and red sand hills took more than twelve months to complete.

Lance was more than 40 years old when he married a 16 year girl, Violet King, who was appearing in his show. Violet was a very capable horse rider who was riding buckjumping bullocks in 1911.

They reared three very talented children - Madge b. 1913, Lance Jnr. b. 1915, and Violet b. 1919, with Madge becoming known as an artist. The other two children followed in their parent's footsteps, with Lance Jnr. becoming well known as a horseman, fighter, wrestler, writer and song writer, writing many of the songs made famous by Tex Morton. Violet also became a champion horsewoman. It was the children who added the "e" to their name Skuthorpe.

In her book *Cowboys, Roughriders and Rodeos* Jenny Hicks provided the following information under the heading - 'The Incomparable Skuthorpes'

“In 1926 the Skuthorpe family worked their show through the Victorian country towns then headed onto Adelaide. The crew included Lance and his wife Violet, children Madge, Lance Jnr. and Violet Jnr., fourteen riders, a cook and scores of hangers on. The group had a total of 136 horses, five buffaloes, eight mules, and three donkeys, and were able to manage thirty miles per day.

They arrived in Adelaide broke and Lance put the bite on Sir Sidney Kidman for money to publicise the show. Opening day at Jubilee Oval saw 14,000 people turn up and the money flowed in. After a successful season they lived it up in Adelaide for six weeks until they'd spent all their profits and then moved on to Port Pirie and Broken Hill.

After that the seemingly indefatigable Mrs. Skuthorpe decided that enough was enough and they bought a house at Riverstone, on the outskirts of Sydney. Lance leased his show to another showman and started a brick business. The business went bust when the depression hit so he got a job at the Riverstone meatworks. Although over 60 years of age, it was the first time in his life he had ever held a regular job. On the weekends the family still did the occasional show around the district.

There was always something a little regal about the Skuthorpes, which reinforced the rumour that the first Skuthorpe was the illegitimate son of the Duke of Sutherland. Apart from the fact that it was difficult to get your wages out of him, by all accounts old Lance Skuthorpe was a 'great' man. His physical prowess was legendary - he could jump over a saddled horse in one graceful leap. He was a good dancer, writer and illustrator. He was always well dressed and, always the debonair showman, wore lots of jewellery.

Because of his deafness - it was a hereditary affliction - he compensated by becoming a storyteller. Both Lance Snr. and Lance Jnr. carried themselves with an air of authority that made those that knew them wonder if perhaps the Duke of Sutherland's genes were indeed alive and well.”

It was in the 1920s and 30s the family lived in this district and their home was actually just across the road from Schofields railway siding. The surrounding paddocks were used to run their horses and the home was used as a base from where they commenced their tours of the country towns. The children all attended Schofields Public School at various times. It appears the family left the area after their return from America, and moved to the Bankstown area.

Lance Jnr. and Violet learnt their horse riding and buckjumping skills at an early age and featured prominently in their father's show. In 1938 they were invited by Colonel Tim McCoy to America to appear in his Wild West show “Roughriders of the World”, recognised as the biggest show of its kind in the world. They were accompanied by their mother and performed as roughriders, with Violet becoming a star also with her whip cracking and rope spinning.

An American journalist at the time wrote - *“This pretty girl from Australia is a match for any fiend in the shape of a horse ... with elegant ability she sat animals whose wild eyed ferocity drew gasps of horror from the watchers. She is a regular Boadicea for courage.”*

When they returned, Lance Jnr. took over as front man of the family's buckjump show and turned it into a smaller, more commercial, more American outfit --- It became “The Skuthorpes Wild West Show.” It was cheap, light to transport, and a good money spinner. In the late 30s and 40s there would not have been a person in Australia that didn't know the names Lance and Violet Skuthorpe.

Lance Jnr. won the Buckjumping Championship of Australia, held in Sydney in 1944. Just after winning this title he recalled travelling around the country with his Dad, when people were

indifferent to shake his hand, they only wanted to shake the hand of Lance Snr. It was then he realised that it had nothing to do with any title; it was because they wanted to tell their friends they had shaken the hands of a legend. Violet and Lance Snr. continued to travel with the show, with Lance continuing to travel almost to the day he died in 1958.

After the war Lance Jnr. was back on the road, doing the small sideshows at the agricultural shows. In 1947 - 48 he took the show on an extensive tour of New Zealand. He returned to Australia, toured for two more years and the final Skuthorpe show was held at the Brisbane Exhibition in 1950.

Lance Jnr., like his father, was a bit of a renaissance man. He had his father's physical prowess - he was a great roughrider, an amazing athlete, and could fight like a 'threshing machine'. He had good taste, wore the best of suits, and liked the finer things of life. He was well read and creative. He wrote and performed songs, played the banjo and the piano, and worked in radio with his close friend, singer and song writer Tex Morton. They often combined shows and toured together in the 40s. Both men were intelligent, talented, and good looking with a weakness for women.

Violet started her career as a five year old riding into the ring on a pony to open the Skuthorpe's show. She was riding buckjumpers by the mid 1930s and was Australia's first and foremost lady roughriding star. After the American tour she was always billed as "The World's Champion Lady Buckjump Rider" A competitor at the time wrote of Violet - "*she was a lovely person that radiated ... there was a real glow, and she was 100 per cent a professional performer.*"

Harris Davis, now living in South Australia, recalled Lance Snr. running his sideshow at Windsor and Richmond, and at Riverstone in the paddock alongside Conway's shop. He recalled a particular donkey that Lance used. He would load three to four children on his back and give them easy rides around the ring. He would then load three to four bigger kids on the donkey's back and then whisper into the donkey's ear, about half way around the ring the donkey would toss the kids off, much to the amusement of the crowd.

Harris recalled Lance having an interest in the clay pit out near Carnarvon Road. and would often see Lance, with his characteristic straight back style, riding his horse past the Davis home in Grange Avenue.. Even in his later years Lance maintained this straight back seat in the saddle. As a lad, Eric Conway recalled Lance walking around Riverstone, a powerfully built man with a straight back, often with his stockwhip hanging over his shoulder.

The Skuthorpe family left the Schofields area in the late 1930s and moved to the Bankstown area.

Many outback folk loved to fantasize with their humour and Lance Snr. was no exception, becoming well known as a writer and story teller. The book "The Stockman" features two of his short stories, and also his classic tale of whip cracking: *One day when Lance was sitting on a country railway station he noticed a man mounted on a horse on the other side of a line of trucks cracking his whip, whereon the line of railway trucks began to move. "By God ! That's whip - cracking" he thought.* The trucks having concealed the presence of a bullock team besides the tracks.

Lance Skuthorpe Snr. died in Liverpool hospital on the 9th February 1958 and was buried in a church cemetery in the Kurrajong district, his place of birth.

Compiled by Clarrie Neal in August 2000.