

Damper, Wild Duck and A Cup of Tea. Bush cooking while droving.

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Most days breakfast is damper and a cup of tea. The cook has been awake well before the drovers to prepare these. Every cook has his own recipe for damper and how it should be cooked. Flour and water are the main ingredients. Some use a rising agent like soda bicarbonate. He doesn't – he reckons it's not damper when you do that.

Real bush damper is made in the following way: Take three breakfastcupfuls of flour, one teaspoon salt, one cup of water. Mix the salt into the flour, make a hole in the centre and pour in the water. Gradually work into the flour and knead the dough well for about fifteen minutes. When it is quite soft and pliable flatten it out with the hands till the cake is about two inches in thickness. Bake in hot wood ashes for about half an hour.¹

Last evening's coals will still be hot enough to cook the damper which he puts directly on the coals. Some coals might stick to the damper when he takes it out and he will scrape them off. Depending on how many men are in the team he may have to make additional dampers. There is no nice way to eat a damper. To serve it he uses his knife to cut off hunks of it. There isn't any butter. He has some golden syrup to drizzle onto the hunk of bread. Or he has some home-made quandong jam which he picked up at the last station.

The other way of cooking the damper is in a camp oven a round cast iron pot with a lid. It can be used for soups, stews, casseroles, roasts, puddings.² With the camp oven you can put coals on the lid also. Or you can make damper in a billy which is set among the coals. It's useful to have more than one billy. One can be used for tea while the other cooks the damper or a stew.

He gets some bacon and fries it up in a frypan. One of the drovers makes a damper and bacon sandwich.

The cook uses this formula to work out the bare minimum of food he needs per person per week:

8 lbs. flour
10 lbs. beef
¼ lb. tea
2 lbs. sugar.³

To this he has added baking powder, tinned meat, pepper and salt, Worcester sauce, jam (in case there is none in the station's store), curry powder, onions, potatoes, tinned tomatoes, vinegar, dried fruit and rice. He will see what the store at stations they go past have. He reads the signs left by other cooks and swaggies⁴ as to which stations are well-stocked but more importantly those which are friendly and generous and those that are not.

When the drovers have left to begin the day's trek he washes all the breakfast utensils, douses the fire, checks on his stores and heads off to the next campsite. He has two horses, one for him with

¹ '11 Australian Dishes' Recipes, *The North Queensland Register* 24 January 1896 p.8

² A camp is a round cast iron pot with a lid. It can be used for soups, stews, casseroles, roasts, puddings.

³ Harney, Bill, *Bill Harney's Cook Book*, Rigby 1960 p.83

⁴ An itinerant named for the bed roll he carries often across his shoulders.

some of his cooking equipment the other carrying the rest of the equipment and the food items in a pack saddle that will get lighter each day.

Between them they carry:

1 10 inch camp oven⁵

3 billy cans, with lids

A kerosene tin, for boiling

A good, strong, heavy-bottomed frying pan

2 saucepans

3 yards of No.10 wire to make wire hooks

1 shovel

1 axe

A folding (meat) safe is also useful, as is a griller

Plates, cutlery and mugs

Hurricane lamp, kerosene, extra wicks⁶

The herd will be slower than he as they amble along and feed and they will have a break around noon. He will have the fire and a billy ready for when the drovers come to tonight's camp. The camp will usually be near a permanent source of water, like a billabong. He may have time and the inclination to angle for fish or yabbies⁷ for dinner. Yabbies can be tossed into a billy of boiling water. Any fish he gets he'll gut and cover all over with mud. That then goes straight onto the coals. When it's been given a reasonable time, say forty minutes, it's taken out of the coals, the baked mud is cracked and removed taking the fish scales with it. He learned this from Mick an Aboriginal drover a couple of drives past.

The billabong may have waterfowl which he can shoot for roasting in the coals for dinner, or the drovers may have had luck and shot waterfowl or they may have shot a roo or a plump goanna. If a roo then he can get a couple of meals from it – kangaroo tail soup, and kangaroo steaks. If it's a goanna just roasted in the coals will be fine. If not he will make something from the tinned meat he has. He's got some curry powder. He'll have to adapt this recipe slightly as he doesn't have any fat.

Put a tablespoonful of fat into a saucepan; when melted, add any kind of vegetables, cut into small pieces, and a little water. Stew gently till vegetables are tender, then mix a teaspoonful of curry powder to paste with water, and stir in. Chop up some tinned meat, and about ten minutes before serving, add the meat to the other ingredients; it, should have time to heat thoroughly without extra cooking. This is a great improvement on the ordinary "tinned dog" and can be made tasty without the curry powder.⁸

But he is nothing if not resourceful. Mick showed him some bush foods. He has dried bush tomatoes which he will grind and add to a stew or soup. He must keep the drovers satisfied with his cooking. If they get disgruntled with him they'll get him fired. The station manager must keep his drovers happy and he knows getting them well fed is a big part of it. There are plenty of others who would jump at the chance when he leaves.

⁵ A camp stove is a large pot with lid that sits in the fire among the coals and sometimes has ashes put on the lid as well.

⁶ Harney ... pp. 84 - 85

⁷ Yabbies are freshwater crustaceans like crayfish but smaller.

⁸ 'Australian Stew' Bush Cooking, *Western Mail* 3 June 1911 p.40

The drovers have shot a brace of wild ducks which he plucks, splits flat, and removes the innards of. He will let the fire die down and roast the ducks on the coals.

At the last station he bought a tin of condensed milk which won't last long after opening it but can furnish him with something to make a pudding with, and everyone will welcome something sweet in their 'post and rail tea'.⁹ He bought some sago too.

Sago Pudding

Boil about three cups of water; add a tablespoon of condensed milk, and a pinch of salt. Then stir in $\frac{3}{4}$ cup sago, and boil for about ten minutes, stirring occasionally. An egg beaten up and stirred in is an improvement. Rice pudding can be made in the same way but takes rather longer to cook.¹⁰

After the meal, a last round of tea. He will bring out a bottle of gin or whiskey and doles it out judiciously. The drovers tell tales of the drives they have been on or the sheds they have worked and the cooks they remember.

'A well-known character is 'Shirtless Jack.' He cannot be persuaded to don a shirt, even when women are about. This amiable idiosyncrasy has driven him into the Never Never, where station managers and overseers are generally bachelors.'¹¹

'Taylor the Rager' is a nasty man to quarrel with. He fought in the ring in his youth and is still 'handy with his fists.' In a shed where there had been murmurs of discontent he once brought in the pudding himself. 'Gentlemen,' he announced, 'There's your duff. Anyone who doesn't want a piece of that can come outside and have a piece of the cook.' With his eye upon them the shearers finished the duff to the last currant.¹²

He listens while he washes the night's utensils and plates and puts the food away. He wonders what this mob will say about him one day.

He rakes the coals. He doesn't chance putting some timber on it which might flame up and cause a dangerous fire.

The drovers settle in for a yarn.

He turns in for the night. He'll put the dried fruit in tomorrow's damper.

⁹ So called because of the bits of stick that often get into the tea.

¹⁰ 'Sago Pudding', *Western Mail* 10 June 1911 p.39

¹¹ 'What's In Name' Bush Cooks and Their "Handles", *Geraldton Guardian and Express* 28 March 1933

¹² *Geraldton Guardian* ... 28 March 1933