

Ordinary people, extraordinary lives brings together stories of remarkable men and women from across rural Australia. In these portraits we meet down-to-earth, dynamic people who are taking extraordinary steps to bring about positive change. These are people who are shaping our national heritage by quietly tackling some of the big issues: reconciliation, our treatment of the natural environment, the city/country divide. They include Jack Little, former 'ringer' turned Aboriginal health worker; Jill Jordan, whose energy and optimism have transformed a country town; John Thompson whose innovative farming methods have successfully challenged traditional agriculture; Margaret Carnegie-Smith, who helped to combat leprosy in the Top End; and many others.

This book shows the lives of today's pioneers, whose achievements have, until now, eluded public recognition. Their stories, rich in courage, humour, warmth and sometimes tragedy, offer a special view of a fortunate nation as Australia celebrates its Centenary of Federation.



Author and photographer *Margaret Carroll* has a deep commitment to rural Australia. A town planner, farmer and graduate of the Australian Rural Leadership Program, she has set up and coordinated innovative programs in health promotion, New South Wales Agriculture's Rural Women's Network, the first New South Wales Abbeyfield family-style house for older people, and her local landcare group. Margaret currently works in community development in central west New South Wales with the rural financial counselling service.

Ordinary people extraordinary lives

people extraordinary

inspiring
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from rural
Australia



ORDINARY PEOPLE EXTRAORDINARY
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3 Modern Kimberley Pioneers

Pat and Peter Lacy ~

Taking the good with the bad

The Gibb River Road is a mecca for latter-day adventurers to the Kimberley in Western Australia, a last frontier of dusty potholes and corrugations capable of bouncing you from Derby on the west coast to Wyndham on the north-eastern fringe. It's a region of great extremes: storms and flooding from 750 to 1500 millimetres force its closure in the Wet from mid-December to mid-April. In July my husband and I work our way north from Derby through the limestone razors of the Leopold and Napier ranges, past clear waterfalls that leap into cool pools over rocky terraces. Mt Barnett Roadhouse, the only stop on the 700-kilometre dirt road, stocks everything from fishing lines to fast food, including the most costly diesel fuel in a 20 000-kilometre trip. You pay for isolation.

A few vast cattle stations now open their gates to a curious world. The first of these was Mt Elizabeth station, owned by the Lacy family. It is a 200 000-hectare cattle station 365 kilometres from the nearest town, Derby. The air has noticeably cooled with the gradual climb to the homestead, 210 metres above sea level. Nature's avenue of slim white-trunked boxgums funnels us from the gateway on the Gibb River Road to a clearing. Ahead is a long, low house made from pale-pink slabs of hewn limestone, with a side road leading to wooden stockyards, machinery sheds and a cottage. Beyond the cottage, camouflaged by tropical palms, is the camping park.

A tall, willowy woman in her forties, with smooth ash-blonde hair, comes to the homestead gate. She measures me up.

'Are you a journalist?' Pat Lacy enquires warily.

'No, I'm collecting bush stories for a book about ordinary people who lead extraordinary lives,' I tell her. 'I asked Peter if you two would be one of my stories.' The atmosphere warms.

'Oh, that's all right then,' she grins. Our communications have 'gone west' somewhere between our roaming life, largely beyond telephone range, and their hectic life running the cattle station and annually catering for 2000 travellers.

Pat has married into a family of adventurous pioneers in the north Kimberley. She tells me her husband Peter is one of those people who is unfazed by anything. I hear his good-natured chuckle and quiet voice as he comes into the garden talking with Brett, a 21-year-old version of his father. Peter, a sturdy man in his fifties, with a twinkle in his eye, looks at our battered four-wheel drive with amusement.

'My dad pioneered up here in two-wheel drive; now it's four-wheel drive only!'

Peter Lacy's father Frank came from New Zealand when he was in his twenties. Between 1919 and 1939 he crisscrossed the Kimberley, droving cattle on the mighty Ord and Fitzroy rivers and sailing around its treacherous coastline. In the Wet of 1937 he did the last mule pack Royal Mail run between Halls Creek and Fitzroy Crossing. In *Rivers of Time: Frank Lacy, Kimberley Pioneer*, Marion Nixon's self-published story of Frank, he described it as 'probably the worst job I ever took on', having to unpack and repack the precious mail so it wouldn't be swept away in turbulent currents as he and his cantankerous mules forded numerous flooded creeks in the 320 kilometre journey.

'Dad first saw this Mt Elizabeth land when droving in the 1930s, and fell in love with it,' says Peter. He had a government contract to deliver 1000 head of cattle from Wyndham to Walcott Inlet, a remote and rugged area of 11 metre tides where three major rivers surge into the sea. It was the first herd moved from coast to coast across the Kimberley. 'He became pally with Fred Russ at Gibb River station, who talked him into applying for this lease, which he got in 1945. Dad would go droving each year to buy a few cows for the station. One day he delivered a mob to Broome and went to have a feed in the hotel. He had a delicious steak and kidney pie and wanted to meet the cook. Mum was cook. They must have clicked.' Pat can remember Mum Lacy saying, 'But I didn't say "yes" the first time!'

Peter's mother, Teresa Lacy, came from Thangoo station, south of Broome, born of an Aboriginal mother and a white father. Frank and Teresa's family was two boys, Frank and Peter, and two daughters, Mavis and Ann. Peter spent his first year of life droving with his parents and brother. Only a year old when he came to Mt Elizabeth, he used to sit in a beer crate playpen watching his father work cattle. 'My elder sister Mavis, who was educated at Forrest River mission, taught me by correspondence, but any activity outside was more interesting.' He went away to school at the Australian Inland Mission in a former gold-rush town, Halls Creek, in the east Kimberley, but left at the age of 14. His father couldn't afford an education for both Peter and Ann. Peter returned home to do a man's job because his father suffered from asthma, and was running the stock camp with only his brother and an Aboriginal man named Scottie.

'When I was 8, police patrols collected up bush natives to be taken for leprosy checks. The men who were inclined to run away were chained neck-to-neck,' Peter recalls. When a patrol overnighted at Mt Elizabeth his father saw Scottie's family and asked the police to leave them at the station for checking. They were the first members of the Aboriginal community on the station, and still live at Mt Elizabeth. Unlike most stations in the region, the community still forms the stock camp.

'We've had the same group for 50 years,' says Pat. 'They shine at cattle work. When award wages came in a lot of stations couldn't afford to keep big Aboriginal populations so they moved on, but because we're so isolated, the community wanted to stay. The older people got pensions and we paid the stockmen, who shared their money with relations. Peter excised land for the community and taught them house-building and

fencing. He understands and can speak their language, Ngarinyin, and has a strong affinity with them. When people ask him what it means to be an Aborigine, he says, "I just be who I am, Peter Lacy."

Peter thinks he missed out on social life and sports like rugby as a boy, but he did learn how to catch barramundi, a fighting fish. 'We had a solitary life, only brothers and sisters, hardly any other kids.' Their nearest neighbours were at Gibb River station, 32 kilometres to the east, where the mail was dropped. 'When it was dry, Dad and Mum used to drive over and back in an old two-wheel drive Chevy truck, but during the Wet it was a three-day event to pick up the mail on packhorse with a mule.'

I ask how they communicated. 'Smoke signals!' Peter quips. 'We had the old pedal radio, but prior to that you would ride to meet someone, or talk through the Flying Doctor. Dad used to tune in to radio news every night, ABC and other worldwide stations. In the old days you were lucky to see one stranger in 12 months. If anyone came on your property it was to do you harm rather than good, or to pinch cattle.' At the front gate of some stations, signs warned 'Trespassers Will Be Shot'. Now Mt Elizabeth's sign welcomes visitors, but warns against shooting!

Peter followed in his father's pioneering footsteps. 'In 1963 my brother Frank and I put in a 220-kilometre vehicle track from Mt Elizabeth to Walcott Inlet, the same direction Dad drove cattle in 1931. Old-timers, including Dad, said "You'll never get a vehicle down there. It's too rugged." We didn't have any machinery, just crowbars, pick and shovel. We rode first to find the best way through the Edkins and Harding ranges, high sandstone country. That took three weeks. It was fun all the way. We lived off the land, lots of beef. I wonder how we did it now.' Pat says her husband has great bushmanship and an unerring sense of direction. There were only survey maps, not accurate for creeks and hills. They headed west, following the setting sun. Now it is Aboriginal-owned land called Munja and the Lacys have access for safari tours.

Like his father, Peter also went droving. 'With eight guys, 20 horses and six pack mules, we could cover ten or 20 miles a day, depending on whether it was mountain or sandy country. We used to look forward to it. We took turns riding around the cattle at night, making a constant noise by whistling or playing a mouth organ. Any sudden sound on a quiet night, someone coughing or tripping over a billy can, would startle the cattle and you could have a stampede. One year I had a contract to muster Walcott

Inlet and take wild cattle 230 kilometres to road trains. We had two stampedes on that trip. A couple of guys would go after them in the dark to try and pull them up. It was pretty hairy. Some terrain was so rocky we had to string them out head to tail. You couldn't push them too hard, they'd get lame.'

Pat is as adventurous as her husband. She came from a small country town, Wickpin, south-east of Perth, where everyone knew everyone. She started nursing training, but wanted to teach. Looking for excitement, in 1969, when she was 18, she applied for a position as a governess through the WA Pastoralists and Graziers' Employment Agency. The next day instructions came to start immediately at Mt Elizabeth station. Apprehensive, she caught a plane the following evening. 'I didn't know where I was going,' she says. 'I had never flown before, got into Derby at 5.30 am, then caught a smaller plane to Gibb River station. All I could see was red ground and black faces. Peter and his nephew were there. They were very shy. Mrs Russ from Gibb River station eyed my best woollen dress and said, "You're going to be covered in grass seeds on the way home, dear." As we travelled through ten-foot spear-grass in an old Land Rover without windows, I became a pin cushion.'

Peter remembers that Pat Burton's arrival 'got the heart racing'. She taught his sister Mavis's daughters, aged 7 and 13, daily tuning into the School of the Air at Derby. There was no glass in the schoolroom windows. 'At first the younger one would jump straight out the window and off if she saw Uncle Peter and horses,' says Pat, 'but they learned to respect me, and she would come back.' Pat's teaching helped the older girl win a scholarship to boarding school the following year. After nine months as governess, she returned south. Peter pursued her. The old Aboriginal people told him she was right for him. They became engaged, then married in 1971. I asked if there was anything she missed from her previous life when she moved to Mt Elizabeth with Peter. 'I used to hang out for a tin of beetroot,' she laughs. 'Whenever I had money, I would buy a tin. The hardest part was not seeing my family for three years. The Lacys only went to town once a year, for the Derby races. It took ten hours. We used to jump in every waterhole because the car had no air-conditioning.'

The whole family moved to a new site and nobody lives in the original homestead. It is still in good repair, as cool as a cave, made of river stones

joined together with crushed antbed broken from anthills and pounded with water to make a natural mortar. Its floor is also made of compressed antbed covered with special tar. For six years the young couple lived in a tin shed in the garden, the louvred windows providing relief from summer heat. 'I loved it,' Pat recalls. 'Peter's mother was a great home maker, gardener and mad keen on fishing. She saved seeds and grew mangoes, oranges, pawpaws, and vegetables. We bought little, apart from sugar, tin jam and flour. It was 50-pound 'bagged flour'. By the end of the Wet, it was full of weevils and tasted awful. Peter's Dad used to say, "Eat it up, it's good for you." There were 500 goats, shepherded by the Aboriginal women. We had kerosene fridges which when they worked, worked well, and old Tilley lamps run on kerosene. We've only had 24-hour power for the last four years and the phone for the last nine years. We relied on the windmill or had a bucket brigade with everyone carting water from the river. There was no septic toilet, only a dunny pan. The Aboriginal women would take me walking for bush tucker or diving for water lily roots. They shared their way of life and beliefs. I helped look after their kids and taught the girls sewing, gardening and cooking.'

Eventually Peter took Pat to pick a site for a house. She told him it all looked like bush and he should choose. 'I've been cursing ever since. It's all rock. We broke it with a pick, carted soil and planted trees. Peter has built everything here.' The rock he levered from a creekbed 130 kilometres away for the house, and cut it with a modified cutting disc on a chainsaw.

The year 1983 was rock bottom in the Lacys' lives. Peter tore a foot off when he rolled a bull buggy (a cutdown jeep) chasing cattle. The bone was sticking into the ground, the sole of his boot twisted up. 'I could see the boot sole and realised my foot was still in it,' he remembers. 'I wrenched the boot back on. Luckily one of Pat's friends was a nurse and gave me a morphine injection from the Royal Flying Doctor Service medical kit. That numbed it a bit.'

Pat says she felt sick when she saw his foot. She kept her cool until she put the medical report in to the Flying Doctor, but once she had given the details, shock set in. 'The Flying Doctor was here in an hour. He put the leg and the foot, which was hanging by a piece of skin, into an air splint to stabilise it for the flight. The surgeon had to stitch everything back together, then slowly get skin grafts to take and patch up the gaping wounds.'

'It developed gangrene. At one stage I nearly lost the foot,' Peter says. 'Peg Leg Pete! They rushed me to Perth and got me onto antibiotics. Pat

was on the station working out what to do with the cattle. She sold some and called it quits for the muster. Ever optimistic, Peter played down the horrific accident and at first maintained he had just broken his ankle and would be back home in a few days. He was stunned to find himself in hospital for 12 weeks. What helped save the foot was a movement machine that rotated day and night, backwards and forwards, round and round to keep the muscles going. 'I was nine weeks on my back in the Charles Gardiner hospital and for a few weeks after that hobbled around on crutches. Eventually I threw them away, and I'm still hobbling around.' He is laconic about continual pain and a slight limp. 'I couldn't ride any more. It's constant agony, but I've learned to live with it.'

In the same year Peter's father died and so did Pat's father. She was coping with two small children. 'I was always run down, but I had to remain strong to keep going.' She remembers her hair falling out and going to a hairdresser in Derby, who asked Pat's sister-in-law what was wrong. 'I think Pat must be under some sort of stress!' she said. Pat's dry humour often disguises her own strength and courage.

In 1984, a week after Peter had thrown away his crutches, a mate called in during the Wet and they decided to fly to Derby. 'On the way back, we were over Mt Barnett, descending for Mt Elizabeth, when we ran out of fuel. We were coming down in the hills,' he recalls. 'The wings were hitting trees. We said goodbye to each other.'

Pat was at the station airstrip waiting for them. When they didn't arrive, she returned home in time to hear 'search and rescue' on the two-way radio saying a plane had gone down in the Mt Barnett area. 'I knew straight away it was him,' she shudders. 'The country was so rugged and never in my wildest dreams could I imagine they would survive. I went down to tell his mum and she lost the plot. Then I set off to find him. I had the two kids telling me, "We'll take a loaf of bread for Dad, Mum," and "Don't worry Mum, the doctor's plane will come and fix Dad up." What should have been a 50-minute drive took me two hours. I don't recall driving that slowly, but I didn't want to get there. When I arrived, Peter met me saying, "Where the bloody hell have you been? I've been worried sick about you." "You've got a cheek!" I said.'

The pilot had kept his cool. 'We landed in the only spot to land,' says Peter, 'but the Cessna 185 had half a wing torn off, the other buckled and

the belly pushed up. I had bought our daughter Tanya a kid's comb set at the local store, for her birthday, so I flashed the mirror at the search plane to say we were alive.'

Pat says they both had nightmares for a long time afterwards, waking up screaming. 'Peter was supposed to go out on a boat a month later. I said, "There's no way I'd be taking you." He ran into Father Lorenz, the Catholic priest in Derby, who said, "Listen here my son, you've used up your lives." "It depends which way you look at it, Father!" Peter replied. "I reckon I'm having a pretty good run so far."

Peter says a lot of people give up too easily on what they want. He loves the challenge of each day holding something different, 'of setting ourselves a goal and sticking at it'. By the mid-1980s, a new goal started to emerge. Mt Elizabeth was a midway stop along the Gibb River Road for government workers and travellers. 'Kimberley hospitality is "come in, have a bed",' Pat says. 'It was a thrill to see people, but we couldn't keep feeding them. So we put in some accommodation.' Peter started fishing safaris to Walcott Inlet, a fisherman's paradise where great barramundi and small mullet surge in their hundreds into the remote inlet on the twice-daily 11-metre tides. 'The neighbours thought we were mad,' he laughs. 'I thought it might come and go, but it's built up. Showing people the station way of life and Aboriginal rock art goes a long way to lessening the gap between Aborigines and other Australians.'

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An hour's grinding drive away from the homestead my husband and I strip for a swim in a series of placid pools wreathed in paperbarks and pandanus palms. Climbing down beside a waterfall and around a brown snake sunning on rocks, we come upon a magical site, Wunnumburra. On the rocks are painted mouthless white faces with red-ochre halos from which radiate lines. They have large eyes ringed by lines like long eyelashes, prominent noses and rounded shoulders clothed in radiating lines like capes. These strange, compelling faces are Wandjina, an art form unique to the Kimberley. 'They are the spirits in the clouds. Their headdresses represent lightning. Special people are appointed as custodians and are allowed to retouch the paintings,' Peter later explained. To me they look like a group of ancient goddesses, powerful and mysterious, guarding the gorge against intruders from their overhanging rock wall. 'I'm encouraging our Aboriginal community to

show the rock art and tell the stories,' says Peter. 'In that way we hope to protect the art sites.' Pat wants to train and build the confidence of young people from the community to work with visitors.

Tourism has changed the Lacys' lifestyle. Non-stop from April to November travellers camp or stay in the house enjoying generous family meals and day tours. 'You either do it properly or not at all', is Pat's philosophy. Unlike Peter, his children have grown up surrounded by people. Pat is concerned about the impact of eager tourists on this fragile country and the pressure on facilities. She thinks numbers will have to be controlled or pristine wilderness areas may be degraded.

The isolation can still close in on them, sometimes at the hands of unaware bureaucracy. In 1998 the ABC ended its shortwave radio service due to budget cuts. Outback people who relied on it protested, but to no avail. In February 2000, as the Kimberley drowned in a huge Wet, the Lacys were about to step onto the mail plane from Derby to flood-bound Mt Elizabeth when the Civil Aviation Safety Authority decreed no further passenger transport. They had to charter a plane, at six times the cost. 'We are going backwards,' concludes Pat. 'There are not enough of us to matter.'

Peter's life is devoted to his 3500 cattle, which he is gradually upgrading from Shorthorn to Brahman. They are shipped live to South East Asia and the Middle East. The meatworks at Broome, Wyndham and Derby have now closed, unable to compete with live exporting. The mustering begins during our visit. Rays of the rising sun catch in dust swirling up from horses' hooves as Brett and six Aboriginal stockmen saddle up. The Lacys muster with horses as they always have, but now a helicopter flushes stock from rough country. The horsemen round up a 'coaching' mob of cows and calves, which they shepherd along to quieten wild cattle brought in by the helicopter. Mustering time has halved to six weeks with the choppers.

Back home, Pat is packing supplies for ten days from a well-stocked storeroom into Superb Baker's Flour drums. Food, fuel and swags are neatly stacked into the back of a lumbering old army truck driven by a now snowy-haired Scottie. His wife Maisie is the stock camp cook. 'I used to take a Land Rover with small swags for six horsemen. You've got softer and the swags bigger since helicopter mustering,' Pat teases her husband.

An hour's drive from the homestead, the helicopter whirrs overhead, bringing belligerent Brahman bulls in to the 'coaching' mob. The horsemen

ring the mob like centaurs. Peter drives an Avgas-fuelled bull-buggy with tyres strapped on the front, chasing breakaway cattle. He takes off at great speed through scattered trees, trailing blue smoke. A bull tosses its head at the buggy, trying to reach Peter's unlikely offsideer Dennis Taylor, a bible translator who lives in the Aboriginal community. Peter quickly reverses, turns and bowls the bull over, cushioning its fall with the tyres. Dennis grabs a leather strap, leaps out of the buggy and hobbles the angry bull's back legs with the strap. It hops about, still tossing its horns at the men. Eventually it quietens down, then it is unhobbled and runs back to join the mob. It is fast and risky work. We watch from safety atop the truck.

Pat tells me that once when they were mustering, Peter got off his horse to throw a beast, grabbing it by the tail and throwing it off balance so it fell over, but it unexpectedly sprang up and horned him in the groin. 'He applied pressure to stop the bleeding, then dug out a needle and some catgut normally carried to stitch up horses horned by charging bulls and proceeded to stitch himself up. As there were no vehicles in the stock camp, he then rode 30 kilometres home and called up the Royal Flying Doctor Service doctor on the radio. The doctor reassured Peter that he had done all that needed to be done and to call back if the wound got infected and get a prescription for antibiotics.'

Peter is incredibly tough, and like all those in isolated places doing potentially risky jobs, he needs to be. 'After some narrow misses with savage bulls, he got a revolver,' Pat tells me. 'Another time Peter jumped off his horse to throw a beast, but he slipped on the damp grass and lost his grip. The angry bull spun around punching the ground, trying to rake Peter who was lying there. Its horn ripped his shirt. He was not able to reach his revolver, but an Aboriginal stockman acted as a decoy, teasing the bull from behind a nearby tree to distract it so Peter could get up and escape.'

Peter Lacey is one of those unassuming, courageous people who takes the good with the bad. His wife Pat says she often wishes she could be like him. I think she is. They are two of a kind—modern pioneers reconciling black and white worlds, tradition and technology, family and work, in harmony with their magnificent environment.