

CLASSIC TRACTOR TALES:

The Ferguson Circus

By Ian M. Johnston – Tractor Historian

The most successful tractor promotion ever staged in Australia occurred in the late 1940s and was known as The Ferguson Circus.

HANGING ROCK

The Hume Highway is possibly our most important interstate road corridor. When driving along it, en-route to a tractor do, it is simply a matter of setting the cruise control, just a wee bitty over the legal, and then relaxing into a state of mild hibernation. And **that's** the problem. Motoring along the sweeping multi-lane highway, with a legal maximum of 110 klicks, is as mentally stimulating as watching the late night parliamentary broadcast.

I always travel with my survival kit — Margery — and in order to render these Hume Highway journeys more inspiring, we make a point of exiting somewhere along the route and doing the tourist thing.

Several weeks ago when on our way to Point Lonsdale, we bid farewell to the Hume at Broadford and threaded our way via Kilmore through the Macedon Range in the direction of Bacchus Marsh. Quiet country roads meandered through the peaceful countryside until eventually we came to an intersection with a signboard pointing to Hanging Rock.

Everyone knows of the spooky true tale involving a group of picnicking school girls, who mysteriously disappeared whilst exploring this extinct volcanic outcrop, more than a century ago. It occurred to us that Hanging Rock required our inspection.

The rock formation is somewhat unique in the way it is comprised of towering standing stones with fissures and caves everywhere. We eventually scrambled to the summit, admittedly almost on our hands and knees and in a state of near terminal exhaustion. The view over the



The re-enactment of The Ferguson Circus. The tractors and trailers lined up ready for the week long drive from Point Lonsdale to Echuca. (Photo I.M.J.)



The Ferguson TEA 20 is considered as one of the all time great tractors and proved to be the top selling single model of any tractor in post WWII Australia. Owner A. Latimore. (Photo I.M.J.)

Macedon Range was stunning. We absorbed it all then contemplated the disappearance of the Victorian era school girls. Margery was not amused when I too disappeared by hiding silently for a while in the depths of one of the dark fissures.

Eventually we were joined at our lofty lookout by a young school mistress shepherding a gaggle of noisy juniors, all clutching plastic drink bottles. I was pleased to note they arrived at the summit in a similar exhausted state as we oldies.

I considered it my duty to caution the young teacher to keep her flock in a tight group and to count the children carefully when it was time to re-enter their bus for the trip home. She looked at me wide eyed and then, somewhat hysterically I thought, yelled at her charges to line up for an immediate count — there and then!

What has Hanging Rock got to do with tractors? Not one thing — except it was on our way to Point Lonsdale and I shall get around to that presently, but first a brief outline of The Ferguson Circus.

THE FERGUSON CIRCUS

In 1947 the tractor market in Australia was dominated mainly by International Harvester, Case, Massey Harris and Fordson. British Farm Equipment Co. (BFE) a division of Standard Cars Ltd., was faced with the daunting task of introducing the hitherto unknown Ferguson into this stiff competition. The firm had been specifically structured to distribute the new Ferguson tractors in NSW and Victoria. There was only the one basic model to offer, although it was to eventually become available with either petrol, petrol/kerosene or diesel power.

Ferguson marketing personnel from the UK factory conducted high powered training courses for the newly recruited local BFE team. It would be untrue to suggest the training was a form of brain washing. The attributes of the little grey tractor were numerous, persuasive and patently obvious.

Instructions were given in the usage and application of the broad range of cleverly designed matching implements. It was explained that a Ferguson with an appropriate range of implements for individual farmers, became a **system** of farming. This was known as The Ferguson System.



Margery is dwarfed by the weird standing stones at the base of Hanging Rock. (Photo I.M.J.)



R.H. Bare & Co, the well known supplier of tractor spare parts, restored this Standard Vanguard Ferguson service van for the occasion. (Photo I.M.J.)

BFE decided that the best way of establishing Ferguson tractors in Australia was to take them to the farmers and demonstrate on their land.

Accordingly, convoys of Ferguson tractors headed forth into the countryside from the BFE headquarters in Sydney and Melbourne, in order to spread the Gospel of Harry Ferguson. They usually consisted of seven tractors each pulling Ferguson trailers loaded with an array of around 20 different implements. Hundreds of farms were visited and the resulting sales exceeded all expectations.

The convoy became known as **The Ferguson Circus**. They also attended field days and the Ferguson presence at local agricultural shows invariably dominated these events at the expense of their opposition.

It seemed as if overnight, Ferguson tractors were everywhere. Even large pastoral holdings and broadacre farms had tasks that could be made easier by the introduction of The Ferguson System to the property.

Long before quad bikes or even ag bikes came into vogue, sheep and cattle were being mustered by stockmen on Fergies. Ferguson tractor mounted saw benches cut posts and firewood well ahead of the popularity of the chain saw. Countless small arable farms swapped Dobbin or their ageing Farmall A or Allis Chalmers B for a Ferguson.

Within four years, 16,000 Fergusons had been purchased by Australian farmers. This represented a four year tractor sales record that remains unchallenged today for what was basically a single model of tractor. The Ferguson is the most recognisable tractor profile on the land.

As the years rolled on, Harry Ferguson Ltd. and the Canadian giant Massey Harris Co, combined in 1953 to ultimately become Massey Ferguson. Subsequent models, with their Ferguson heritage, continue to be a major player in the world tractor scene today.

POINT LONSDALE

If you overshoot Point Lonsdale you would be on your way to Antarctica. It is situated at the south west tip of Port Phillip Bay and it was to this windy place that the Harry Ferguson Club of Australasia Inc. had invited me to act as one of



One of the Fergies, making an early morning start, on its way to the Point Lonsdale muster. (Photo I.M.J.)



A magnificently restored Ferguson TEF diesel powered tractor, which headed the convoy on the first morning. (Photo I.M.J.)



Although official known as the British Farm Equipment Travelling Circus, it was usually referred to as simply The Ferguson Circus. The term was coined by BFE sales executive Harry Clarke. (Photo I.M.J.)

three tractor judges. The occasion was the commemoration and re-enactment of the greatest of all tractor promotional exercises ever staged in Australia — The Ferguson Circus.

A Ferguson muster had been summoned by the club from which seven individual tractors and trailers would be selected by the judges to form the nucleus of a Ferguson tractor convoy. Tractors failing to be selected, were welcome to tag along behind on the long five day journey from Point Lonsdale to the Murray River town of Echuca.

My fellow judges were Ron Keech, Gunnedah Rural Museum, and a Victorian tractor identity Steve Cartright. We somehow managed to arrive at an amicable agreement about things, despite there being only one tractor that truly conformed to the original circus tractors. In order to select units we were obliged to turn a blind eye to numerous idiosyncrasies such as chrome nuts and non original exhaust pipes. There were even a couple of Cranvel trailers pretending to be genuine Ferguson originals.

But in the world of old tractors these deviations are considered to be of little consequence. What counts is the fact that the tractors have been preserved for posterity, their owners have a continuing passionate amorous regard for them, and the Ferguson Club members are all true blue characters each deserving Oz of the Year titles for their contribution to our rural history and heritage.

Along the way to Echuca, The Ferguson Circus was officially welcomed at each town by local dignitaries. Main street parades had been arranged complete with police escorts, bus loads of excited children cheered and waved flags, and nostalgic old timers were observed wiping away a tear or two as the little grey tractors reminded them of more gentle times. Additionally, around \$8,000 for charity was raised by the club members.

There were certainly some sore backsides by the time the convoy triumphantly entered Echuca. However there were no complaints, only large grins from ear to ear, and it wouldn't surprise me if, somewhere in that great paddock in the sky, Harry Ferguson was looking down — also with a grin from ear to ear.