



HOLIDAYS 'UP,

by TOM TRUSTRUM

If you're interested in a holiday that's completely different to anything you've done before, farmer Jack Lovick, up on the High Plains, near Mount Buller, Victoria, has just the thing.

For \$10 a day, he'll provide you with horse, grub and grog, and let you ride alongside, as he goes out droving his herd of 600 prime Herefords.

There's just one small . . . er . . . complication. Over 1400 square miles of Crown land and most of it's 5,000 feet up in the air, in the mountains beyond Buller.

No point getting your map out because the mountains are so rugged that no-one's bothered to print the names yet. But just for the record, they're known locally as: Mounts Despair and Bugger, Terrible Hollow, Devil's Staircase and Hell's Window.

Jack Lovick has spent more than 50 years in the mountains of the Great Divide and he knows every inch of them. He's probably the only living man who does. Couple of years ago he received the British Empire

When weariness takes over, they slump to the ground, and sleep.

TOP,

Medal for services rendered in rescuing injured hikers, climbers and skiers. There are quite a few people alive today only because of Jack.

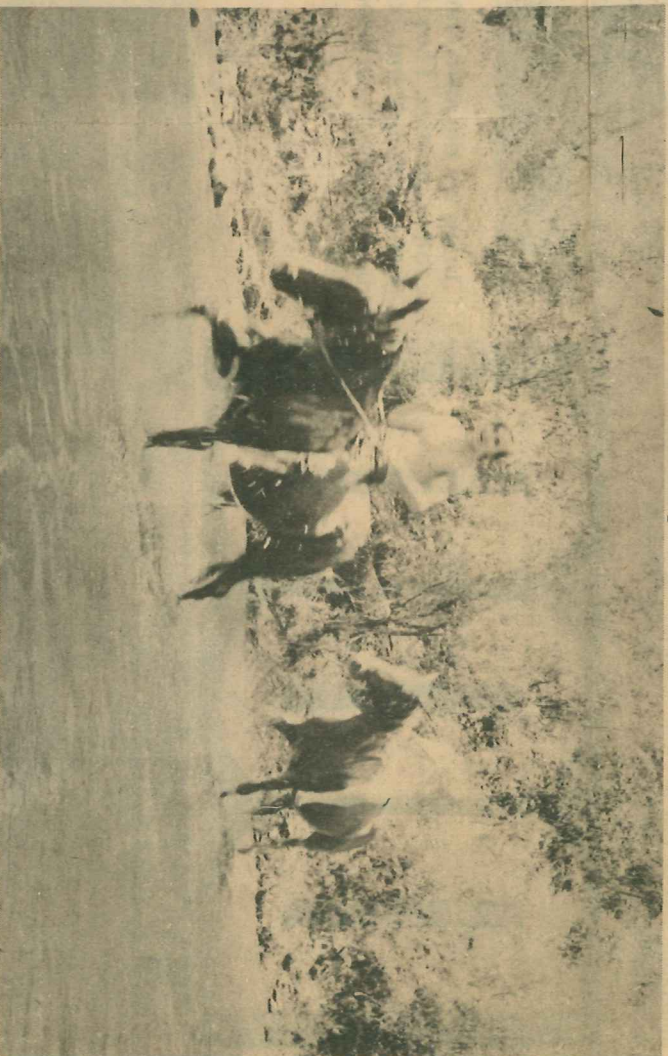
He's a third generation farmer and, with his two sons, Charlie, 22, and John, 24, he spends nearly six months a year up in the high alps, moving the herd from peak to plateau, valley to gorge.

They take horses and a Landrover. They disappear for weeks at a time between October — when the snow begins to melt — and March — when the first dark clouds of autumn return, to fill the valleys with thunder. They work from sun-up to dusk, and when weariness takes over they slump to the ground, zip into their sleeping bags, and sleep like the dead.

For all the toil and sweat, they're free men, doing what they enjoy, in their own way. They've got no boss. Every day

is packed with good life to be lived. They cook breakfast and boil the billy in the golden light of dawn. Their only neighbours at night are the ghost gums, shining like church steeples in the moonlight.

Last week, Jack invited me



to join a group of 11 fresh-air lovers, on one of the fortnightly treks he's been running throughout the summer. So on Saturday morning I duly arrived at his Merrigg farm, 120 miles from "The Smoke," to find out what it was all about.

STEEDS

Jack and sons came down from the tall slopes to collect us. We stowed our gear into two Landrovers and climbed up onto the steeds provided. Then we moved off the property, in Indian file, and pulled our reins towards the mountains.

In addition to Jack, Charlie and John, there was neighbouring farmer, Pat, who provided the second Rover. Wendy, also a farmer's wife, came along to supervise the catering.

Jack selected four of his 14

cattle-dogs to travel with the group — Pixie, Ringo, Old Man and Galloway — and 13 horses, namely: Bess, Sambo, Gypsy, Stella, Cheeky, Roger, Delatite, Scoombs, Grey Mist, Honeybunch, Indian, The Reverend Mr Black and Playboy.

At five o'clock we arrived at Jack's 100-acre "bush block" on the Howqua River, reached by a road bulldozed through the hills by the Forests Commission, for the timber trucks. The Rovers had already arrived and Pat and co. were cooking tucker over the camp fire.

BARBACK

We weren't too happy about sleeping under the sky with the horses champing around, but Charlie said: "They never step on anything soft." So we took his word and crawled into our bags. In five minutes, all that could be heard were enthusiastic snores — horses munching — and the occasional bird, having a late-night argument about which branch to sleep on.

About 30 kookaburras woke us next morning as the sun poked an enquiring dome over the hilltop. It sounded as

That afternoon we started the real climb — up into the mountains. We'd lived for so long in suburbia that we'd forgotten what a real slope looked like.

We couldn't believe that Jack REALLY wanted us to go up that hoof-pitted cattle track that would have snapped the transmission of a car like matchwood. But all Jack said was: "That's nothin' — you'll see." So we just had to wrap our legs around our horses — and pray.

The prayers lasted all afternoon and if God was listening, please excuse us. Every foul word that ever left a man's throat was uttered during the next five hours as the horses leaped and staggered up and ever upward, with their sweat running into ours. Apart from the obscenities, the only other words spoken were: Jack's, saying over and over: "That's nothin' — you'll see!"

As we climbed higher the mountain air became cooler and eventually we came to a plateau with a thick, lush carpet of clover, sprinkled with snow daisies, alpine eye-bright and pink mountain berries.

Then we moved down a ridge to a lower level and eventually reached a bush hut, where we met-up with the Landrover party — including the children — who had come up by the crude track driven through the bush by Lovick vehicles, over the years. The hut is owned by the Forests Commission and provides shelter for bush walkers and stockmen. Few people ever get that far.

For all the toil and sweat, they are free men, doing what they enjoy, in their own way.

though they were laughing their heads off at the 12 pale-skinned city folk who were urging Pat to: "Put the bloody Billy on!" The language was no longer "Collins Street polite," but it wasn't anywhere near as strong as it was going to get, at a later stage of the journey.

We made a 10-mile trek that morning — Sunday — pushing up into the forest of mountain ash, although we were still following the vehicle track. At mid-day we reached the Jamieson River, where we unsaddled the horses and rode them, bareback, into the water, on Jack's instructions.

All hell broke loose as the horses thrashed about, out of their depth and feeling for a foothold. But they probably weren't as scared as their riders. Maybe it was just Jack's way of building us up for the nightmare ahead.

The quest — upward — continued on day three, with the dense forest of alpine ash, palms, ferns and vines now giving way to Snow Gums, alpine grass and moss, and by the fourth day we were near the top. All that remained was another 1,000 feet of mountain which appeared to be all rock, loosely covered with lichen.

Once more we boggled in disbelief as Jack Lovickled the way, shouting instructions regarding where the horses should put their feet. We had no sweat left, no nerves left — and we'd run out of prayers. So we just did as we were told and somehow . . . miraculously . . . we reached the summit. And there, spread below us like a giant map, was — The World! This was the halfway point of the holiday for the others but for me, it was time to get back to Melbourne.

