

PLOD ESSAY: Arthur Smales, Horse Breaker, Coaxer, Persuader, True Educator

Arthur Smales was one of the main characters – aside from the ponies themselves – of Lyn and Joe Chambers' book, *Come here! Gee Off!* written almost thirty years ago. The other main character was Nobby Smith. Nobby was the Stable Manager in charge of looking after all of the ponies that worked in the mine. He was Arthur's boss. Arthur was the Horse Breaker/Trainer and, in the end, Saddler. He trained not only the ponies, but the Wheelers as well. Between Nobby and Arthur those pit ponies at the State Coal Mine were well cared for and beautifully trained. The Chambers thought that calling Arthur a horse breaker was bit misleading. They called him "a coaxer, a persuader and true educator."

Here is Arthur telling his own story on tape in 1984



I came to Australia in 1923. I was 20 when I came. I came straight to Wonthaggi. I had a sister here. And she married Charlie Jones. In Devonshire, I'd had experience with horses all me life, ever since I could ride one. I worked for a horse trainer on the other side of Exeter, but I'd never worked on a farm, until I got work on a stud farm at Dalyston for £1 a week plus meals. I wasn't impressed with the pay and so I told the farmer that eventually I was gonna come into Wonthaggi.

The farmer said to me, "What are you gonna do? There's no land in Wonthaggi to raise horses. Stay out here if you want land."

I said, "How am I gonna get land if I'm only making £1 a week?"

He raised my pay by 5/-, but I left him all the same.

I started working for a bloke named Carmichael doing the roads in Wonthaggi. I drove two horses for him with drays. I unloaded blue metal for him down at the Railway Station. Then I poured it onto the road where we had to shovel it into position. We did all the work with shovels. We made those roads by hand. A lot of us did it, all local lads. I worked with a fellow named Don McCrae. One morning we loaded up the two drays and instead of driving his off, he jumped down beside his dray and he said, "Look, Arthur, this is no good. It's too hard. I am gonna get enough money to buy a little farm and then the banks will stand with you. Then buy another one. Never put your money in the bank... then I'll buy a bullock."

He was a dreamer, but I agreed with him, working on the roads was too hard

Then I went to work at the State Coal Mine. I went on the drills. Off and on for more than 15 years, I worked those drills. We drilled all of Kirrak, and East Area. When we got to East Area we didn't know there were two seams. We got the top seam and we were waiting for the surveyor to shift us on to the next chain, but while we were waiting, the foreman said, "Just keep drilling while you're waiting." And so we struck another seam, a good seam, the seam they eventually worked. We fluked it. Sandy McLeod was on the drilling.

I remember when Sandy and I were told to put a bore down on the Cape Road. Well, Sandy and I, we were supposed to have a look at the site to clean it up first thing. When we got there the Old Fella living there was standing at the gate and asked, "What do you lot want?" We told him we had to clear up the site where we would put the drill which was coming tomorrow.

"You're not coming in here!" he said.

We told him we'd have to get the Management then.

He said, "See that hill up there? I have a rifle and if anyone comes near here, he'll be gone."

Anyway, McLeish was the foreman then. He came with us to help erect the derrick part of the drill. Well, the Old Fella comes up with his wife and sees what we've done and starts moaning about how we've ruined the place.

"We were gonna put strawberries in here!" he shouted. He was going mad and his wife fainted. He had her under his arm and draggin' her along while he was chasing McLeish. I was looking down on all this from the top of the derrick.

After the drills – I went with the horses – well, I stayed on the drills, but the drills would work for maybe three months and then something would happen in the tunnels with a horse and I'd go down to help there. Nobby Smith was in charge of the stables and one day he said to me, "How would you like a job breaking in horses?"

I told him I'd been breaking horses most of me life. Nobby tested me out. He said, "We've got a horse down in the yard there, see how you go."

As I was going to the yard a bloke told me, "Keep away from that horse. I've tried him. He'll hit out with his front feet and everything."

I thought, this is a good trial. I went down and went in the yard where the horse was and talked to him for a while. I can get on with horses as long as no one's been knockin' them about, and I got the rope around him and tied him and everything. In the end, he turned into a beautiful horse.

Anyway, Nobby seen what I could do and so he told me I had to go see McLeish who told me, "Up to now we've been buying older, educated horses used to working on carts, but when we get them down into the mine, they won't work."

I thought, can you blame them? I said, "You need to get young unbroken horses, and we need a stockyard, and a crush and we'll get these young horses."

Well, after listening to me, Mac said, "You do what you like." He was pretty good to me, Mac was. There was lots who couldn't get on with him, but I knew my job and I told him what I was doing, and he agreed with me.

So that's how we started with the young horses but after a while we bred our own horses. We waited until they were three-year-old before we started to break them because they needed to be strong enough for pit work. They just ran free in the paddock, never been handled until they were three and then, one day, we would run maybe a dozen into the yard, pick the ones we wanted and let the others go. Then the caught ones would have their first lesson...

As I said to McLeish, "When you get a young horse, you've got to get him into the yard and get a halter on him and you tie him up and leave him there for a start. Then after he's learned to tie up, you handle him all over and then pick up his feet, 'cause they gotta be shod, you know. If you haven't handled their feet properly, the blacksmith will curse you and say, 'This horse is not broke-in!'"

And then you have to get a bit into his mouth and tie his head back and learn 'im to answer the reins: Left and Right and Stop! You gotta learn 'em that so that when you take the reins away, they will react to your voice and go whichever way you tell 'em. It takes a while. Next you've got to put all the harness on them. Get them used to the weight and then the long tail chain. Then put the sledge on them. As soon as you do that, they get jittery, looking back and seeing the sledge behind them they think something is chasing them, and they do everything to try to get away from it. And you couldn't blame them. Some kick at it, some run, some go mad... so it takes a while, but once they've settled, you've got to educate them to pull the skip. They wear a bridle, more like a halter with a lead on it. It's an open bridle because the ponies have got to be able to see everything."

When I was first put on the horses, McLeish asked me, "What about taking them down below?"

And I said, "Yeah, I'll take 'em down."

Even though I'd never had much to do with what went on below at that stage, I worked it out. When you take a horse below it's tricky. I remember one particular horse I took down... He was a bit touchy, but we got down in the cage all right. I got halfway up the north tunnel where he was going to pick up a skip, but he heard all this

noise, winches, and that going, and he panicked. And, so he started to kick. I got between two props to protect myself. I had to turn out me light because I knew if he saw the light, he would come straight at me. So, I stood in the dark and he didn't know what to do, which way to go. I couldn't see him, but I could hear him banging and kicking for maybe 10 minutes although it seemed like a lifetime. Finally, he quieted down and I turned on me light and he was just standing there. I talked to him quietly for a long time. But in the meantime, Ted Fairless had been listening to all the noise going on and he must have run to the manager and told him that a horse had gone mad. So just as I was quietening the horse down, I saw a couple of lights were coming around the corner and the men were calling out, "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, everything is all right," I said, and I began to lead him away. He had kicked off his harness and so I had to carry that and lead him to the cage. Mr Frank Loughran was there and he was pretty good. I asked if I could take the horse to the surface and he helped me out. When we got to the surface, I put the sledge on the horse and said to him, "Old fella, you're gonna get it now from here up to the road as hard as you can go."

It was a good solid sledge and away we went. It was miles to the road, and I didn't let up on him. When we got back to the cage, I went down first and I told them to load the horse on and send him down and I would catch him when he hit bottom. Well, when he come down, he was just about done but I kept at him. I put the harness on him. I put the skip on him and led him up and down until it felt like a day's work to him. I kept working with him for about a month and then he went down to 20 Shaft and was a good horse.

Before I started with the horses, I was told about a horse name of Crack. They had taken him down below and up to the head where they hooked him up to a skip and he cleared out. They never seen him again until he got to the shaft. After that, they put him out in the paddock. Condemned! They asked me if I thought I could do something with him. Well, I took him out to a straight where I could run him, and I worked him pretty hard. He turned out to be a good horse, too,

easy to work with in the end and that was a horse that had been rejected.

After I had been working the horses for a while, they lost their saddler and Nobby come down one morning and told me I had to do the saddling. I said, "What? What do I know about saddling?"

Well, Nobby just shook his head and told me I had to go up to Williamson's and learn. I was horrified, "You can't learn saddle making in five minutes," I said. "It takes years. If you go to stuff a collar, like, and you don't stuff it properly and it isn't balanced, it rubs against the shoulders and gives the horse sore shoulders and he can't do his work. You could ruin a good horse."

Well, Nobby says, "I don't know. That's the orders and you gotta do it."

And so I went up to Williamson's [Leather Goods & Saddlery] and there was an old saddler there who come from Dandenong. He looked at me and he started remembering another bloke from the mine he had to teach, who was sent up to learn same as me. This old saddler said to me, "I hope you're not like that other bugger!"

I said, "WHY?"

He said, "He was telling me what to do!"

I said, "Well, I don't know nothin'."

So, this old fellow was pretty good. He learned me. And when he thought I knew enough, he said to me, "I'm leaving Wonthaggi, but if there's ever a time you're in trouble come to me." He learned me everything. So, I ended up being the saddler at the mine and doing the breaking as well.

It got so busy, sometimes, that I didn't have time to work the young horses I'd started and so Nobby would send a bloke over to work with me. And I'd have these fellas driving a horse or something. Well, one day Nobby sent Doodle Martin over, and I handed him the lead and said this one's going good. Just take it steady. He's learning Left and Right and when you start him off let him go very steady. Don't let him jump start. Down below you don't want him jerking off the skips. Nobby assured me this young fella knew about horses: "Oh, yes," he said. "His father's got a horse and jinker."

I'm saddling horses about a half an hour after he began working with the pony and Doodle

come up to me and he pulled his shirt up to show me the pony's footprint planted on his chest. I said, "How'd you get that?"

Doodle said, "He was stopped, and I walked straight up behind and wacked him on the backside with me hand and he went whop with his back foot!"

Well, what did he expect? Some funny things happen with the horses.

Once trained, the ponies work eight hours, the same as a man. Oh, they were well looked after, well fed. Nobby made sure of that. Well, they would work their eight hours down below. They got nothing to eat during the day, but some wheelers, who thought a lot of their horse, might give them a bit of chaff at crib time. Nothing better than a chap that liked his horse and his horse liked him. A good horse is a real help to them down below. If the wheeler didn't have a good relationship with his horse, they can cause a lot of trouble. But a good horse, he is a champion to ya. Like once they've learned to work with you, if a skip gets off the track, then the horse can help you put it back on.

When eight hours was up, the ponies were brought up from below, before the men came up, and they were hosed down with warm water, not cold water. Then they were fed well in their own stall with lots of chaff and hay and that's where they would sleep during the week. Some of them lie down, but not usually.

On the weekends, all the ponies were turned out into the paddock. Nobby rotated them from one paddock to the other, so they always had sweet grass to nibble. Nobby was good that way. He was always thinking of the horses. Over the long summer break, he worried that the grass would burn off and leave the mob hungry. He had a real interest in those ponies.

I loved anything to do with horses. Old Taberner wanted to get some sports going in the town to raise money for the hospital. Way back then was just when they started bullock riding, and that's what he wanted to do. He asked us at the mine if we could supply the crush and the yards, he could get the bullocks. Of course, we horse handlers were all going to have a go at this bullock riding, but none of us had ever done it before. So, Bolding said his dad had some young

bullocks, and we practiced on the bullocks at their place. Gee it was funny. Ridin' a bullock is different from a horse. With a horse, when he bucks and if you were half-way over the side you were gone, but with a bullock, the skin rolls. So, on my first ride, even though I was stuck on tight, I began to roll to the side with the skin. So, I jumped off and planted my face 'cause I didn't keep running after I jumped. I realise after that, if I had stuck with the bull and he changed direction, the skin would have moved and pulled me back up. After that, I knew how to ride a bullock. We got good at it. I went to Melbourne to ride with some of them, but I got a crook bullock who wouldn't buck. He just wandered over to the crowd to have a look.

Taberner had buck jumping with horses, too. He was looking for local riders. Me and a couple of other blokes volunteered. You got £2 if you stuck on him. They brought in a big horse then who would buck straight, but buck high and throw you up so far you didn't have a chance of coming down straight.

I worked at the mine until I retired. The last horse I ever rode was Skipper. I was breaking him with another horse. It was Friday afternoon and at knock off time, I used to let 'em out the stock yard and they would go across to the next big paddock. Well, I decided I would ride Skipper over to give him just that bit more education. So, I hopped on him and opened the gate and the other horse took off. Skipper wanted to go with him. I couldn't hold him back. I should of let him go, but instead I pulled hard on the left rein to force him to turn back. He turned and was heading for a slope that went down going towards Nobby's house. Then he started to buck. Try staying on a horse when he's going downhill and bucking. He got his head between his front legs so there was nothing in front of me, you see. So, he sent me off him. And there was one log in the whole paddock and when I went over him, I landed on me back right on that log. I went out to it, you see. I didn't come to until I was in the ambulance heading for Dandenong.

I stayed in the Alfred Hospital for three months and then at Caulfield for two or three months. I was on two sticks when I left. But I soon threw them away and I learned to ride a push

bike. Then later they did one more operation on me and I was fixed.

When I got back to the mine, Nobby got me working on the saddles as saddler. I was on the Miner's Pension, but they worked it out that I could work two days a week and still get the pension. And that's what I did. I worked with ponies a bit, never rode again. I like horses. No matter what people say about a particular horse I can always get along with them. Never met a bad horse.

I retired just before the mine closed.

*Arthur's story edited by c.r.landon
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