

## The real McLeods

“There it is – the Sahara Desert,” Ormond McLeod says through a weathered, boyish grin, pointing towards the approaching red sandhills on the century-old Kelso Station. Ormond, better known as ‘Ormy’ to his family and friends, is the down-to-earth head of current generation of Kelso McLeods – an entrepreneurial contrast to the more frivolous fictional McLeods in television’s *McLeod’s Daughters*. “If you took a photo now and then came back in six months time, even twelve months time, it’d all be different.”

Located on Pooncarie Road, around 8km outside of the small town of Wentworth in south-west NSW, Kelso’s Mertenalli sandhills and billabong have played a significant social role in the lives of three generations of McLeods and a vast number of Kelso’s neighbours. Ormond would use “an old bonnet of an old car” to slide down the steepest incline with younger brother Rod and younger sister Kay.

The almost kilometre-long billabong, Mertenalli Creek, has been dry for nearly fifteen years now, but was once was a popular recreational site despite its proximity to the Murray River and Darling River junction. “It’d fill up and we’d sit at the edge of the water - just like at a beach,” Ormond says, standing on the sandhill’s east-side rim and gazing appreciatively over the dried billabong stretching wide from his left to right. The McLeods would even water ski on the billabong during flood-times.

The McLeods have also opened the Mertenalli gates to a number of commercial ventures. “Toyota come out almost every year (to the sandhills) and do tests with their 4WDs,” Ormond explains, looking down a steep incline still bearing the remnants of tyre indentation. The sandhills have also been used as a location for film and television crews, offering the McLeods a unique form of star-studded entertainment at their backdoor. Comedian Jimeoin booked Mertenalli to film scenes for the 1995 film *Craic*. Pop boy-band Taxiride used the site to film a videoclip. An episode of the futuristic children’s television show *Thunderstone* was also filmed at the sandhills.

The perks of owning your own sandhills seem to be many. “He was in *The Man from Snowy River*,” Maree McLeod says with a sly smile, coaxing her husband to talk about his brief appearance as a swaggering horse-handler and buggy driver. The McLeods find a photo of Ormond in *The Man from Snowy River* television series. In the photograph, Ormond stands slouched against a red-brick set wall with his arm resting on the back of a chair where friend and former neighbour Jenny Byrnes is seated. The other hand is casually and comfortably hooked through the right brace. He wears a drover’s hat and a scarf knotted around his neck. His smile is broad through a greying moustache. His eyes crinkled into dark lines. Ormond McLeod could have easily have come from his grandfather’s era.

A very young Donald Ross McLeod arrived in Australia in 1854 during the troubled ‘cleansing of the Isles’ in native Scotland. In Australia, “grandfather McLeod” worked as a shearer in Victoria and NSW until 1880, when he was granted a property by the Western Division of NSW located around 12kms from Wentworth, which he called

Oakbank. Around this time he married country-girl Georgina Caroline Schell, who came from a property called Tolarno located halfway between Pooncarie and Menindie. “I didn’t know her, but my father said that she could remember Burke and Wills when they went through Tolarno in 1862,” Ormond says, admitting to being a history buff. “What she remembered were the camels, because they were so rare.”

In 1904, Donald and Georgina McLeod purchased a part of nearby Tapio station, which was “one of the big properties in the area”. It was a good deal for the family, says Ormond; “It was a good piece of land and close to Wentworth – they also had a big family of nine to ten!” Donald Ross McLeod called the property ‘Kelso’. “I always wanted to know why he called it Kelso,” he says. “Kelso is a township in Scotland. My grandfather came from Scotland when he was a little boy. Kelso means ‘close to the river or water’ in Gaelic. And he would’ve known a bit of Gaelic.”

Ormond’s father, Theodore (Ted) Murdoch McLeod, purchased a property in the late 1920s in nearby Balranald with his three brothers, which they called Glentilt. Ted managed Glentilt four to five years until the “sheep all died” due to drought and the depression. After working as a carpenter in Adelaide for a number of years, Ted then purchased his brother’s shares in Kelso to own the property outright by 1936. One brother, Lachlan McLeod, purchased a property in Curlwaa and later became Mayor of Wentworth. Roderick McLeod took over Oakbank, and Ernest McLeod took on Dunvegan Grandfather McLeod had purchased the Dunvegan property, located 40km north of Wentworth on the Darling River, just prior to World War 1. Today, Oakbank is owned by Ormond’s second cousin Rod Baird, but Dunvegan “has gone out of the family”.

After studying agriculture at the Scotch college boarding school in Adelaide during the 1950s, Ormond and his 18-month younger brother Rod returned to station life. “My brother and I bought the property from my father in 1969,” Ormond explains, at the time a stocky and well-known local football player with great sense of humour and a shock of thick, red hair. The brothers ran the property together for three years. In 1972, Rod went “into the winery business” and successfully managed the Stanley Wines empire until he built his own business, the Buronga Hill Winery.

“In the 1880s there were seven to eight properties in the district,” Ormond says, “now there are around 130 in the Shire of Wentworth”. Over the last century a number of properties in the area were divided and dispersed among existing land-owners. Significantly, in 1967 or 1968, the lease for a property called Avoca-Para expired – its 360,000 acres were subsequently subdivided and allocated to other properties through applications to the Wentworth Board. The McLeods were granted a property called Milkengay located 100km north of Wentworth on the Broken Hill road and a grazing lease in nearby Coomealla, also on the most northern cusp of the NSW and Victorian border.

Today, the Kelso McLeods own and operate around 13,000 hectares - 75% is Western Lands Lease, 25% is freehold - split evenly between Milkengay and the main Kelso

home-base property on Pooncarie Road. The Coomealla property was sold in mid-2005 to the local campus of La Trobe University.

The new family home, a warm western red cedar homestead, overlooks The Darling River. The domed corrugated iron working dogs' kennels, located a few metres from the new house, and is also home to a corgi affectionately known as 'Princess Dora'.

The old family home, a modest iron building fattened over the decades due to a number of ill-matched extensions, was pulled down not longer after Ormond's mother died in the early 1980s. The land, located around two kilometres away from the new homestead, was sold to a man who also owns a property outside of Broken Hill. "He has a few sheep here," Ormond says, "and when he has to shear, he uses our shearing shed".

Shaking a rusted sheep rattle Ormond smiles as he takes in the air and atmosphere of the 100-year-old sheering shed. "Smell that sheep smell," he says, his smile widening when thrown a subtle 'don't go there' glance by wife Maree. Side-by-side they gaze out over the sheep yards through one of the shearing shed's side windows. Ormond points to the new shed from the recently sold Coomealla property. "We had to bring it out in two lots. It's big! Colossal!"

Other than the working dogs, sheep, cattle and Princess Dora, the McLeods have also adopted a number of ex-battery hens. "When we buy them, they are all de-feathered and thin," Maree says, leading a large, fully-feathered flock to the homestead's backyard lawn. "They won't come out of the cage for a week," Ormond says, watching as hens quicken the pace to follow Maree. "When you first get them they're not used to seeing the sun, so we have to put them in the shed for some time," Maree says, ending her husband's train of thought.

The to-and-fro repartee is a common dynamic in Ormond and Maree McLeod's relationship, possibly developed over years of marriage based on his role as the active larrikin and her as the levelheaded lady. They first met while Pooncarie-born Maree was a boarding school student in Wentworth.

"We were discussing this the other day - that you knew my parents before I knew you," Maree says to her husband. "You said that all wrong," Ormond replies walking to the other side of the room, trying to hide his smile. Maree repeats what she said, a smile edging at the corner of her mouth. "We met at a wedding," he says. "We met at a cheese and wine night," she says. "(We) fell into place," he says. "We were friends for a while - it just kind of happened."

Maree enjoys Kelso in humidity-free autumn, while Ormond is an all-seasons kind of guy. Kelso station in the springtime smells of fresh grass and wattle. The landscape is picturesque due to recent rain. "We had 250mm of rain this winter - the average yearly rainfall is 275mm," Ormond enthuses. "Over the past four to five years we've been averaging half of our average winter rainfall. We can now say that the drought has finally broken!"

The drought that turned the Mertenalli billabong into a crusted saltpan reduced the number of sheep on the station from around 4,000 to around 2,000, and the number of cattle from around 300 to just a few dozen. Rabbits were also an issue. “About four to five years ago, we did a rabbit ripping program all through this country,” Maree says. “(Hypothetically) they were eating the equivalent to 2,000 sheep. A bulldozer took 150 hours and did 2,500 warrens on 10,000 acres.”

Faced with the gradually diminishing traditional business, Kelso’s McLeods looked to other opportunities, with a substantial amount of success. “We have quite a bit of water allocation, so we diversified,” Ormond says, expressing gratitude to “father McLeod’s” foresight in securing an early water allocation. Both parents, Ted and Leila (Le) McLeod, applied for and received irrigation licences shortly after the World War 2. “I do a lot of trading of water – I sell.”

In the mid 1980s, a local family approached the McLeods to lease a section of land a kilometre or two from the Mertenalli sandhills and billabong. “He has a certain amount of water agreed,” Ormond says. The lessee grows and cultivates 60 acres of rockmelons, 10 acres of nectarines and 10 acres of apricots. During peak season, Kelso’s sheep, and the odd flock of galahs, feed from a pit of rockmelon scraps. “The sheep gobble them up – you see them with orange all over their faces,” Ormond says, chuckling at the visual memory. The rockmelon, nectarine and apricot patch has proved so successful that the sharefarmer is currently building more permanent amenities for seasonal staff.

Then in the mid 1990s, the McLeods approached another local family, well-known and trusted “town people”, to cultivate 75 acres of grapevines and 25 acres of citrus a very short distance away from the family’s western red cedar homestead. Like the rockmelon, nectarine and apricot patch, the vineyard and citrus grove is fully irrigated, but also uses a computer activated watering system called Environscan. “He just switches it on and off from Mildura!” Ormond explains with an admiring shake of his head.

The McLeod’s longevity strategies are not limited to just leasing allotments of Kelso land. “Then to diversify even further, we bought a little vineyard across the river (The Darling),” Maree McLeod says while drinking hot tea at the kitchen table, pointing to the vineyard’s location through the floor-to-ceiling window at the back of the house. It was an opportunity to good to overlook – the asking price was “less than the value of the water on it”. Called ‘Ninja’, the vineyard was previously considerably rundown and took a number of years to take shape due to cost and time. The existing dried fruit vines, originally planted in the 1940s, were replaced with wine grapevines. “And I made sure I had a deal with Stanley before we bought the property,” Ormond says.

Comparing Kelso’s businesses based on income, Ormond believes that the sheep and the cattle and the Pomona block are “on level terms”. He explains: “In the good years you can make more out of the sheep than the vines, but in the bad years, such as these with the drought, we don’t make as much from the sheep.” Unexpectedly, Maree’s home-grown and widely respected jam and pickle business called The Woolshed Pantry, which

began sixteen years ago in “an ordinary kitchen in an ordinary house”, has developed into a profitable Kelso business. “I have always made my relishes and things, but more than we could eat,” she says. “I started selling because I was making more than we could eat.”

The Woolshed Pantry has snowballed beyond expectation and has become a full-time job for Maree. “I cook in the morning up until one o’clock or two o’clock in the afternoon, and then I do labelling in the afternoon.” Despite the success, Maree has no ambition to expand. “If it got any bigger, I’d have to employ, and I don’t want to employ. When it’s at the height of season (in summer), I don’t have time to label everything.” A close friend helps her peel fruit, and the youngest of the Kelso McLeods daughters helps with the additional cooking and labelling.

Ormond and Maree McLeod have two daughters. One is blonde, the other brunette. Both are as pretty as actors in the *McLeod’s Daughters*. Jane, the brunette, is 28 years old and is nine years older than blonde sister Lucy. Growing up they rode trail bikes instead of horses, and played in the smaller sandhills near the family’s red cedar home. But as a treat, their birthday parties were held at Mertenalli. Walking into the kitchen at the end of the day Ormond hears the mention of birthdays and sandhills, and says that friends would say “Lucy’s lucky; she’s got the biggest sandpit in the backyard”. Jane, Lucy and Maree roll their eyes and say in unison, “we already said that”.

But despite being Kelso born and bred, Ormond and Maree McLeod’s daughters aren’t the kind of country girls to muster sheep, fix a tractor and marry the boy from the station next door. Wearing low-slung jeans and sleek ponytails, they resemble street-wise city girls more so than sun-kissed country girls. Jane has spent a substantial proportion of her 28 years living away from Kelso – at boarding school in Adelaide, later at university in Melbourne and more recently in Sydney studying Journalism at University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). 19 year-old Lucy is studying Cultural Tourism at Flinders University in Adelaide.

“We all went away to boarding school and all came home,” Maree says when the topic of Kelso’s future is raised, “but it was a different generation (then).” Maree, who grew up on a station in Pooncarie around 100km north of Kelso Station, first went to boarding school in Wentworth, then in Melbourne, and then completed a secretarial course at Stott’s Business College in Melbourne. Ormond boarded at the Scotch College in Adelaide. The future of Kelso has yet to be determined. “There are no McLeod boys,” Maree continues, smiling at her two young daughters. Jane and Lucy, their neighbouring cousins Alison, Catherine and Joanna, and five female Oakbank-based cousins are the end of this Oakbank/Dunvegan McLeod line.

Jane comes back to Kelso regularly, but sees being back “like a little mini holiday” rather than where she belongs at the moment. She admits to having “big aspirations”, but like Lucy, she does not entirely rule out returning to Kelso one day and finding that boy from the station next door. “It’s not out of the question,” she declares, offering a sly smile to her bemused mother sitting at the other end of the kitchen table.

But for Ormond McLeod, it's obvious that he wouldn't want to be anywhere else. "Tonight I have to go mustering - we start jetting sheep tomorrow," he says with enthusiasm, getting ready to head off with 25 year-old station-hand Shane who has worked for the Kelso McLeods since 2000. "We just finished crutching, and we're working on the new shearing shed as well as doing a bit for the vines. Every day is different."

### **Break-out**

The Woolshed Pantry began fifteen years ago in Maree McLeod's "ordinary kitchen" in her "ordinary house". The home-made produce is sold in a number of winery outlets, a shop in Adelaide and a well-trafficked health food shop just over the border in nearby Mildura. Her pickles, chutneys, jams, jellies, honey, herb vinegars and 'seasonal delicacies (such as 'cherries in brandy syrup'), also make an appearance at a wide variety of country-based events – from country fairs to local markets.

Ingredients come from a variety of sources; tomatoes and fruit are purchased from local farms; and rockmelon, nectarine and apricot "seconds" come from the sharefarmer on Kelso land, which she says "don't make good jams, but make good chutneys and sauces". "I was commissioned by the 2004 International Ballooning Festival to make a chutney to go with kangaroo," she says, listing the chutney's exotic ingredients as red onion and native quandong.

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