

BOOLIGAR BLOOD

FOUR GENERATIONS OF THE CROTHERS FAMILY HAVE
WEATHERED A CONTINUOUS CYCLE OF DROUGHT AND
FLOOD TO KEEP BOOLIGAR STATION GOING.

STORY KERRYNN SUTTON PHOTOS DANA GLUZDE



CLOCKWISE: Douglas, Lorraine, Tom, Pam and Donald Crothers; Donald, Tom and Douglas survey cotton planting preparations; Donald undertakes maintenance in the pump shed; (rear) Brooks Crothers, Jane Crothers, Bill Crothers, (middle row) Harry Crothers, Hannah Crothers, Tom Crothers, John Rowland Eather (Hannah's husband) and, seated at the front, Katie Eather.

DAY BREAKS and the morning light washes a breathtaking golden hue over the paddocks, softening the landscape. It's a dry year on Booligar Station. The land is parched and suffering the effects of harsh summers with little to no rain, and the grass that remains is crisp underfoot. The Crothers brothers, Donald and Douglas, have met at the machinery shed to discuss the day's work. Donald's son, Tom, who also works on the property, wanders over from the old family homestead to join them.

This family has Booligar blood running through its veins. Proud custodians of the historic station located 45 kilometres south-west of Dirranbandi, Qld, the Crothers family continues to run the family enterprise that began in 1864. "We are very sentimental about Booligar," Donald says. "It is our home, it's in our blood and there is a lot of water under the bridge, that's for sure." When it rains and the river catchment fills, this landscape is transformed and becomes a hive of activity. Fertile black soil produces fat cattle and bumper cotton crops.

Donald and Douglas run the property with their wives Pam and Lorraine and are the fourth generation of Crothers to do so. Douglas and Lorraine's daughters, Lauren and Andrea, return home on university holidays to manage their own sheep enterprise. Their other daughter Caitlin, and Donald and Pam's daughter Rossina, have both left home pursuing teaching careers.

Today the station is made up of three parcels totalling 10,900 hectares of cropping and grazing land, including the original

tendered block. Sheep and cattle were the mainstay of early operations at Booligar, however, modern-day production includes cattle, cropping and fodder and, more recently, irrigated cotton. The property is located on a floodplain with predominately black soil interspersed with gentle undulating sandy ridges. From the air the land looks like a series of serpentine rivers when in flood.

"When the river runs it starts as a finger of water, not a wall of water as some people might think," Pam says. "The trickle dips over the sticks, relentless, comes around the corner at the bend in the river where previously you might have walked. You hear the water move over the dry leaves and slowly the river fills; it really is something to witness."

During the dry the birdlife all but disappears, returning after rain. "It amazes me to think where all the wildlife goes," ponders Pam, recounting the flurry of ibis, pelicans, blue wrens and the many species of duck that descend on the waterways, breathing life into the landscape once more.

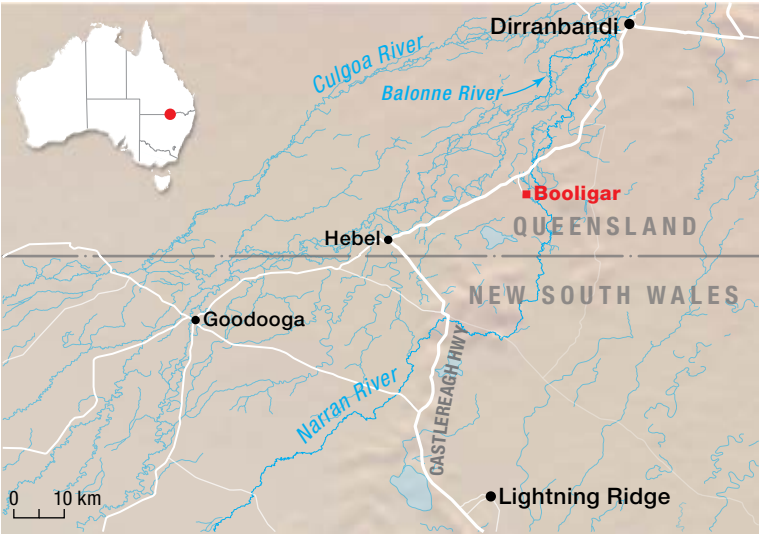
There aren't many farming operations or businesses in general that have operated continuously for 150 years, through two world wars, the Great Depression, the Vietnam War, the shift to mechanisation, the early 1980s recession, rising input costs and a constant cycle of drought or flood. Donald and Douglas acknowledge and salute their forefathers and the accumulation of ingenuity, tenacity and a "damn-well determined approach" that continues to shape their lives and operation today.

Thomas Crothers arrived in Australia aboard the barque *Amelia Thompson* in 1839 with his wife and seven children. ►



“You hear the water move over the dry leaves ... it really is something to witness”





He settled in Maitland, NSW, and re-married in 1858 and had another 10 children.

Thomas’s sons Alexander, Thomas and Henry, and their wives, left the area with a keen interest in moving on to the land. On February 2, 1864, they tendered successfully for the original Booligar Station, 16,000 acres (6475ha) on the eastern side of the Narran River, with Henry and his wife Jane – who had 11 children – taking up residence. (Henry eventually moved back to Maitland and became mayor.)

Over the next 85 years various Crothers family members would have an association with Booligar. The holding increased to its present size when a block was purchased from neighbour Frank Treweek. The two families have been neighbours for more

than 100 years, with Cate Bucknell (nee Treweek) and her husband Dick still working the property there today.

Tom Crothers, grandson of Henry and father of Donald and Douglas, bought out his family’s shares in the property after the death of his father in 1954 and remained there until he and wife Noel retired in the 1990s.

Tom and Noel took up residence in the Booligar homestead as newlyweds. Noel was a city girl from Melbourne who learnt early on the challenges of living in a remote location with a harsh climate. The floods of the 1950s caused significant isolation, with the station cut off for up to six months at a time. When Noel was heavily pregnant with her first baby she left the property sitting in an armchair that was mounted to a trailer, which was pulled behind a tractor.

“Mum was an amazing person of strong constitution,” Donald says. “Back then, the poor road conditions and crude transport meant a trip to town was a rare experience; it must have been a shock for mum to arrive at Booligar. As a champion tennis player, I think she had visions of being able to regularly compete and play the sport she loved. Mum and Dad both enjoyed playing tennis on the surrounding properties, but a trip to town happened once a month in the early days.” Douglas adds, “Like many women of that generation, she just got on with it and made the best of the life. She was not only resourceful, but she also stepped up to home-school the five of us.”

Donald says his father felt a strong sense of duty to Booligar. As school captain of The Scots PCG College, in Warwick, and captain of the football team, Tom was a keen athlete who enjoyed all aspects of school life. However, the 1944 drought meant that



The Crothers family gathers at Booligar for the 150-year reunion in 2014.

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he was unable to complete his final year, returning home to cut scrub with an axe, as was the practice in that era.

“How we’ve come to be has always been defined by drought conditions,” Donald says. “Dad felt a strong sense of duty to return and Douglas and I have experienced the same pull home.”

Knowing that he had to look for new ways of doing things to keep the property going, Tom saw an opportunity to harness floodwater to grow fodder for stock. “I look back now and it makes me more appreciative of what Dad did to enact change – it was a time when information was nowhere near as accessible as what it is today,” Douglas says. “We would go on road trips for weeks on end, from here to western New South Wales and to Werribee in Victoria, looking at alternative ways of doing things. Dad talked to anybody that would lend him an ear.”

Tom set about building what was then the largest privately owned dam in the Southern Hemisphere, introducing irrigation in the lower Balonne. “The dam was 25 acres [10ha], which does seem small by today’s standards,” Donald says. “However, back then it was a big deal; no-one had built such a large dam in our area and I think people thought he was mad.”

The dam took 12 months to construct and water was pumped in in 1960. “Dad was one of the first people in Australia to introduce a water-powered centre pivot, which was able to water 15 acres [6ha] at a time,” Donald says.

The Crothers introduced fodder silage pits to the area in 1961 and by 1965 they had 5000 tonnes of fodder stored underground as a drought-management strategy for sheep. However, wool prices continued to fall and, coupled with ongoing drought, sheep and wool producers were suffering. “It was a tough time and a lot of people didn’t recover,” says Donald wistfully, recalling that by this stage his parents had three children at boarding school and hard times were taking their toll.

In the early 1970s, the family built a 60-sow piggery and commenced feedlotting cattle, as well as introducing a Sahiwal cattle stud. “Cropping for fodder was our way of value-adding,” Douglas says. “No grain left the property – it became too expensive to freight so the grain was fed to anything with four legs!” By 1975 both Douglas and Donald were at home working alongside their father, returning to assist in the drought as their father had done before them.

“We’d had enough of sheep,” Donald says. “There was a depression in the cattle industry and we decided we should put the

place up for sale – it broke Dad’s heart.” However, as fate would have it, even though the contract was signed and a deposit was taken for the sale of Booligar, the transaction fell through. “Thank heavens for the foreign-investment rules back then, as the government stopped the sale,” Douglas says. “It was to our good fortune in the long run.”

Donald and Douglas introduced cotton production in the early 1990s. In 1997 they built a second dam, a similar size to the first but taking only 10 days to complete. By 2003 there were five major water storage facilities with the potential to store 9200 megalitres from the Narran River. Approximately 6880ha is now allocated for grazing cattle, 3360ha for dryland farming and 690ha for irrigated cropping. In a non-drought year, forage oats are grown for the fattening of cattle. Following three recent consecutive floods, cotton has been an important aspect of station life at Booligar. The dry climate, access to water and plenty of sunlight hours means the family can produce high yielding and high quality cotton even when destocking has occurred due to the lack of grass.

While she is the first to admit that generational family farming has its ups and downs, Pam recognises that a key aspect of Booligar’s fortunes has been an ability to effectively work together. “I think sometimes we overlook what it means that we can all sit around the table to talk, laugh and even cry about things,” Pam says. “We have all worked hard at it and I guess a key element is respecting each other, our place and recognising the skills we all bring to the table.”

In 2014 the family celebrated with 400 people, including 90 Crothers descendants, the 150 years of continuous operation at Booligar. Guests were invited to give their own account of life on the station, which was recorded for future generations. “You know I was thinking about how all those people gathered because of their connection to the land,” Pam says. “The land owns us, not the other way around. We have some amazing interviews recorded. The first guy couldn’t even begin because he began sobbing. One of our shooters has told his children to spread his ashes between the Gadsby dams [on Booligar], and the rest were very emotional. Incredible isn’t it?”

For the Crothers family, Booligar will always represent a deep-rooted sense of place and history. “To be honest, I am not sure what the future holds for family farms in Australia, and it pains me to say that,” Donald says. “But what I do know is that while we are here, we’ll continue to give it our best.”



The sun sets on historic Booligar Station.

