**Essays on Mount Crosby - Barbed Wire**

In 1874, Joseph Glidden invented a commercially viable way of making barbed wire and he demonstrated how effective it was on his ranch in Illinois. A little over a decade later Australian farms, including those at Mount Crosby, were making use of Glidden's patent wires and a multitude of local variants.

It would be easy to underestimate the importance of barbed wire in enabling rural development. Prior to barbed wire, fences were generally either absent (as when shepherding) or, for permanent installations, heavy post and rail types that relied on a constant supply of good quality timber. Both were labour intensive and, while these fencing methods coped with the pace of pioneering, more productive farming really needed something better.

Throughout the 1870s, more and more land was made available for selection (known as alienation). The selectors fenced this land to demonstrate improvements to their selection and also because shepherding was inefficient at this scale of agriculture. At first, none of the selectors had even heard of Glidden and his barbs, so they set about fencing their properties with the materials they had at hand, namely wood and more wood. Even as late as 1890, fences are generally described as being of the post and rail type - but things had to change, and they did:

*Alexander Stewart, Engineer to the Brisbane Board of Waterworks – April 1890:*

*… I think a suitable fence will be a top rail with four wires, [and] as there is a difficulty in obtaining rails in the district this will probably be cheaper than a three rail fence…*

Here Alexander is hinting at a solution to the shortage of rails caused by the indiscriminate use of timber, not to mention the cost of labour in constructing the three rail type. His solution almost certainly refers to plain wire, but barbed wire had real advantages over plain wire. It is lighter and the way it is wound out of two separate wires creates a torsion that resists slackening or breakage (not to mention, cattle don't like to lean on it).

From the beginning of the 20th century, barbed wire became our ubiquitous fencing material, which is not to say it was without problems. Barbed wire is very damaging to native animals and can inflict painful wounds on livestock. Its use around mount Crosby has certainly diminished as the ratio of horses to cattle has increased and modern electric fences have created a viable alternative. Perhaps the end point is illustrated by the Norwegian Government's policy on barbed wire - "*a total ban on the use of barbed wire as a fence material for domestic/farm animals*".

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