

# The Chalmers Story... Fifth Generation Territorians



In 2011 Charlie Chalmers signed the first voluntary conservation covenant on pastoral land in the Northern Territory as part of the Territory Ecolink project. The 474 hectare Mac and Rose Chalmers Conservation Reserve encompasses Tower Rock and the final resting place of Charlie's parents, Mac and Rose.

This is the story of the Chalmers family, beginning with Charlie's Grandfather Charles who blazed the way for a new life for his family in the Territory.

**C**harles Chalmers was different to the other men scratching out a living on the sunburnt plains of central Australia.

He was approaching 50 years of age when in 1920 he resigned his position as a school teacher at Mungindi on the Barwon River in northern NSW to take up land in the Northern Territory.

He and his wife Cora set off in a covered wagon in the shimmering haze of a scorching February day in 1921. With them were their four children: 11 year old Jean, 8 year old Mac, 6 year old Don and 3 year old Jessie.

They headed towards Boulia with their 290 sheep, 13 horses, 4 cows, a small herd of goats and 5 squawking, bantam hens.

*'I think you're a damn fool, Chalmers,' said one person. 'But good luck all the same.'*



*MacDonald Downs wool bales being delivered on a 1932 A.W.C. Government Roadtrain to the Alice Springs rail-siding.*

They made slow progress and they didn't reach Boulia until late in the year. Charles decided to stay there a while and sit out the hot summer months. Little did he know they would be held up for more than a year and a half as the country further west experienced one of its regular dry spells. There was little rain in 1922 and the first half of 1923. It was a tedious wait as the months dragged on but travelling into the Northern Territory was completely out of the question.

It wasn't until 3 June 1923 that they were able to leave Boulia and continue on their long trek. Some rain had finally fallen. Their next destination was the Georgina River and then they would head into the Territory. The locals said they might get to Argadargada waterhole, on the Territory-side of the border. But beyond that was a long waterless stretch, known as the '80 mile dry country', blocking their way to the Plenty River. Only camels had got through there in the past. It was madness to take sheep through that country.

But Charles Chalmers wasn't put off. He was a positive and cheerful man. Despite his age and not being born to this land, he seemed to revel in unknown situations and the challenges that a harsh environment constantly threw in his path. For him the unknown was simply a situation to be faced and resolved. Five weeks after leaving Boulia they reached the safety of the Plenty River. They had made it to the Territory and the chance of a new life.

Most of the land in this area was still in its virgin state with only one block having been taken up for grazing. That was Charlie Dubois' Huckitta Station, on the north side of the Plenty. His horse King Ingoda had won the Melbourne Cup in 1922, making him a local celebrity. A little further west was Mount Riddock Station, run by Ben Webb and Louis Schaber, and Alf Turner's Alcoota Station.

Charles made contact with local policeman Charlie Noblett who suggested they look at the land north of Mount Riddock. He and Cora obtained a lease, named the property MacDonald Downs after their two sons and began to live their dream.

It wasn't just his age that made fledgling pastoralist Charles Chalmers different. He was running sheep at a time when most stations saw their future in cattle; and his thoughts about the local Aboriginal people were different to the prevailing attitudes of the day. From the outset he insisted his family would be generously disposed towards the 'natives'. The children grew up speaking the local Alyawarra language and the family developed a close relationship with these people, respecting their customs and beliefs.

Charles Chalmers lived to a ripe, old age. He was in his nineties when he died in 1967. His wife Cora had died earlier, in 1958.

Their son Mac took over the running of the station. His younger brother Don moved away for a time. He had a ready wit and once remarked to his easy going, but still somewhat puritanical, father that his aim in life was to have three wives and own a pub.



*Mac Chalmers with a 1937 Ford truck.*

Mac married Rose Agars in 1940. She'd come up from South Australia in 1938 to spend some time with his sister Jessie. Rose was from a farming family on the Eyre Peninsula of South Australia.

Rose and Mac raised 6 children on MacDonald Downs. Their second youngest Charlie, who now runs the family property, says she was 'a jolly, outgoing person.'

'Mum was a very good person. Our home was full of laughter. I can't remember it being hard. Life was pretty good. I had a really happy upbringing.'

In the early days Mac and Rose would go to town every three or four months for supplies. 'The trip would take one and a half, two days,' says Charlie. The flying doctor radio and the weekly Connellan Airways mail plane were their links with the outside world. Like so many other outback



*Mac Chalmers in front of MacDonald Downs Homestead.*

women, Rose was schoolteacher as well as mother. She supervised her children's correspondence lessons over a period of 28 years.

Mac was quieter than Rose. 'Dad was a very hard worker,' says Charlie. 'He made the move from sheep to cattle. He was always working. He worked every day, even Christmas. He wore out basically.'

Rose loved music. One day Mac said they could afford to buy either a fridge or a piano. 'She took the piano,' says Charlie. 'They packed it on the back of the truck and she played it on the way home, when they pulled up under the trees.'



***Rose also loved camping out in the bush in winter and going on picnics.***

The granite outcrop, which she named Tower Rock, was the family's favourite picnic spot. It is now part of a 474 hectare area of land which became a reserve in 2011 when Charlie signed the first voluntary conservation covenant on pastoral land in the Northern Territory. The area supports a diverse range of plants and animals, including

a number of threatened species. It is also the resting place of Rose who died in 1999 and Mac five years later.

300 Aboriginal people attended Mac's funeral at Tower Rock on 16 July 2004. His family's story is one of close partnership with the local Aboriginal people.

## *At one stage there were 350 Aboriginal people living with them on MacDonald Downs.*

There were no white employees. 'The family did it all with the natives,' says Charlie. 'Every day they worked with us, fixing fences, putting up windmills, checking the bores, shepherding sheep in my grandfather's day. Without them we wouldn't have got things going.'

'Lenny Jones and his father Jacob did a lot of work. Every day they worked with us.'

'When we went out, everyone wanted to get on the truck. We had to hold them back. Everyone wanted to go, to work with you. It was all good fun.'



'Mum and Dad fed them and they helped him. There wasn't much money in the early days. Everybody was happy to work.'

The rations system was in operation. 'Mum would have to keep records of who was fed. They got this ration every week, depending on the size of their families.'

'Then the dole changed everything, of course. Mum had to start up a store. Give them money. It all became very difficult. It just changed everything.'

Mac and Rose struggled with the changes that swept through Aboriginal affairs in the 1970s and 1980s. Their world was changing dramatically but they always believed that the land the Chalmers family occupied was Alyawarra land - nothing was done without first consulting particular owners of that area of land regarding fences, roads and bores etc.

Rose frequently visited all of the Aboriginal camps and spent a lot of her own time looking after the people and tending to their health. Mac was a generous man who spoke Alyawarra fluently, shared his skills with the men and provided them with work.

Alyawarra leader Lenny Jones said at his funeral,

*'Thank you very much to the Chalmers family and goodbye to a great man.'*



*A place to reflect: The Grave Site of Mac and Rose Chalmers within what is now the Mac & Rose Chalmers Conservation Reserve.*

## For more information:

- Pick up a copy of the **Mac & Rose Chalmers Conservation Reserve Fact Sheet** for more information about facilities, access and safety. Available at Tourism Central Australia, Mt Swan and Gemtree.
- Contact **Tourism Central Australia** on (08) 8952 5800 or [www.discovercentralaustralia.com](http://www.discovercentralaustralia.com)
- For further reading, **Beyond the Furthest Fences (M. Ford, 1966)** details the life of the Chalmers family.