

STATIONS

# CALM BEFORE THE STORM

*The mob at Angepena station, in SA's northern Flinders  
Ranges, takes the long dry in its stride.*

STORY GRETEL SNEATH PHOTOS ROBERT LANG

*The view of  
Angepena homestead  
and outbuildings  
from Angepena Rock.*





*Mudlapena Spring has year-round water – even in drought – and is a favourite family picnic spot.*

The sun is slowly rising over Angepena Rock, casting its warm glow across the baked red earth surrounding the homestead. The sound of bleating sheep breaks the early morning silence as a

small mob of ewes and lambs take dainty steps along the dry creek bed behind the shearers' quarters, searching for green pick and fallen gum leaves among the pebbles.

Last February, the Frome River was awash, with 43mm of rain blocking road access for several days. Angepena station owner, Tony Nicholls, says it had been bone dry for nearly four years prior to that freak summer downpour. "We had good winter rains in 2016 and we were lambing at 122%, which is unheard of, and then someone turned the tap off," he says.

The tap has only just been turned back on – albeit

briefly. In mid-September, Angepena recorded 50mm in 24 hours, with October bringing some welcome follow-up. In the long years between these rare rain events, it's taken bucket-loads of optimism and an eye-wateringly expensive feed bill to get by.

"Normally with droughts, you still get a bit of rain and you can just scale back a bit, but this time we've had to cut down to a few breeders and we're keeping them going on hay and pellets," Tony says. "We never knew much about hay before this drought started but we're starting to learn a lot about it now – particularly how expensive it is. We've >



*CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Mustering feral goats has been key to Angepena's drought survival; Santa-Angus cattle feeding on hay rations; Tony Nicholls mustering: "Tony thinks goat mustering's a holiday – I've got to keep reminding him that it's work," says his wife Lesley; Emily Nicholls with one of the stragglers.*





*Knock-off drinks around the fire at Alioota Hut.*

spent thousands and thousands of dollars; we got that far in that we just had to keep going.”

It’s been a hard slog, but Tony and his wife Lesley remain incredibly upbeat. “The costs make things a bit harder at the moment, but it’s going to come around again,” Lesley says. “You don’t just give up; you persevere and ride it out.”

Angepena station lies 47km east of Copley, right in the middle of the highest point on the range, and the entrance isn’t all that far from Italowie Gorge, where RM Williams once camped and handcrafted his first pair of leather boots. Traditional owners, the Adnyamathanha people, have called Angepena the heart of the northern Flinders, and the old map proudly displayed on the homestead wall outlines a roughly heart-shaped boundary with three creeks in the top paddock linked to three different lakes: Lake Torrens, Lake Frome and Lake Eyre. They’re like arteries pulsing with vitality – except for when it’s dry. Then, the property runs on hope, hard work, and an overriding sense of duty towards this precious land the Nicholls family has called home for half a century. “We’re here because we love it,” Tony says.

Tony’s grandfather, Lance Nicholls, bought the

Angepena pastoral lease at auction in 1966. He already owned Warraweena Station, 50km to the south-west, and the nearby Beltana Hotel, but he wanted to add another property to even up the ledger given that he had three male heirs among his 11 children. Youngest son, Syd, was sent north with his new bride Fay.

“Dad went to the sale and didn’t tell anyone; he came home and said, ‘You had better pack your gear, you’re going to Angepena’. Dad made the rules,” Syd says. “Fay was only 19 at the time, and she went on to have three kids in three years and had to cook for all of the workers as well, so it was a huge thing for her.”

Plucky Fay rose to the challenge, and her shearing smokos became legendary. She’s still at it today, handing out her jelly cakes and quandong slice, quietly hinting that retirement in the Mid North town of Orroroo isn’t nearly as exciting as station life. “We had 42 years at Angepena and I loved every minute of it,” she says. “I really miss it, but I knew Syd couldn’t keep going.”

With three boys of their own, Syd, now 78, was faced with a similar predicament to his father when it came to succession planning. He thought that the easiest solution would be to sell Angepena to an outside party, but

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*Luke Nicholls' partner Courtney Rowe (Almerta station, Carrieton) enjoys morning tea with Lesley and Lesley's mother-in-law, Fay Nicholls.*

negotiations were messy. In the end, middle son Tony was given a birthday ultimatum in 2009: “Come up with the money in a fortnight and it’s yours”.

Tony and Lesley were living in Leigh Creek with their three energetic teens Sarah, now 27, Emily, 25, and Luke, 23. Tony worked at the Leigh Creek coal mine before setting up his own earthmoving business, while Lesley had the postal run for 14 years. She had grown up next door to Tony at Depot Springs, and they both jumped at the chance to be back on the land.

“It’s my home and I love the place, so we were over the moon about it,” Tony says. Syd is relieved that they were able to take it on. “I’d sooner it be this way,” he says.

Angepena is filled with many wonderful family memories, but the property also carries a lot of history. Adnyamathanha people have a strong spiritual connection to the land, which is now under native title. There are numerous sacred sites and objects of traditional significance, including ancient cave rock art, but the Nicholls’ respectfully steer clear and concentrate on farming.

The pastoral lease was first taken up in 1855, and the station’s remote location saw it become a regular staging post for inland expeditions. During the 1860s, the Cobb & Co coach would stop at the old Angepena homestead, >



*Soldiers Rock is a popular breeding ground for yellow-footed rock-wallabies.*





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Luke Nicholls shearing a ration sheep for the freezer; Grace Hoskins, 4, befriends a kid; Angepena's Merino flock is down to 500 after drought forced the Nicholls to destock; Emily Nicholls at the sorting table.

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The Angepena mob (l-r): Syd and Fay Nicholls, Tony and Lesley Nicholls, dog Bundy, Alex Hoskins holding daughter Grace Hoskins, 4, Sarah Nicholls, Emily Nicholls, Darren May, Kane Jarrett, Luke Nicholls holding Indi and Courtney Rowe.

and it's rumoured that the horses transporting the exhumed remains of the explorers Burke and Wills were briefly rested there en route to the state funeral in Melbourne.

In 1892, the discovery of gold at Angepena drew several hundred Chinese prospectors, who camped there for around two years until they caught word of larger fortunes elsewhere. There was a boarding house, pub, and even a police station to restore order, and while a town site was surveyed, it didn't eventuate. Old stone ruins are sparsely dotted throughout the 366sq km property, and broken bits of coloured glass and floral china scattered in the surrounding earth are delicate reminders of industrious settlers building a new life in the bush, their precious heirlooms from faraway places proving no match for the harsh environment.

"It doesn't come much rougher than this place as far as ruggedness goes," Tony says. As his ute bumps and slides along a rocky rise, he thanks his lucky stars that he hasn't had to sell all of his bulldozers. Tony takes a lap of the property at least once a week to check the troughs and look over everything, but daughter Emily assures the trips would be more frequent if it were wet.

"Every time it rains, dad always goes out for a drive,

even if it's wrecking the roads," she smiles. "He just loves seeing the rain."

"You'd be amazed what happens when you get a good season," Syd adds. "It's unreal how it can revert back from nothing to exceptional coverage of native grasses – it's like lawn."

In the decade since he handed over the reins, Syd has proudly followed the next generation's progress in difficult times, with several hundred kilometres of fencing and







*Map of Angepena station paddocks; copper sample.  
It was mined at Angepena from 1859, with gold  
discovered there in 1892.*



seven new bores among the significant achievements.

“We haven’t got any worries with water on this place; there’s plenty of underground water and natural springs, it’s just a lack rainfall that is the problem, as it means no feed can grow,” Tony says.

A series of trapyards built at various water points are proving genius for luring feral goats, and have been the key to the station’s drought survival. US demand for goat meat has pushed the dressed weight as high as \$10.50/kg, and Angepena has been sending around 2000 head annually to Thomas Foods International’s Lobethal abattoir. “Aside from the earthmoving jobs we’ve been able to pick up, the goats have saved us,” Tony says. “The surrounding properties don’t have the permanent water like we do, so they all seem to come into here. They mob right up when it’s green, but when it’s dry, they tend to scatter; it’s every man for himself.”

Goat mustering carries all of the anticipation of a regular muster, and the dust flies as Tony, Luke and Emily race their dirt bikes across a parched plain in pursuit of a small herd. It’s the first time they have seen kids for a couple of years, and the healthy offspring are a good sign that the land is making a slow recovery.

“Tony thinks goat mustering’s a holiday – I’ve got to keep reminding him that it’s work, but you take the Esky and roar around on the bikes; it’s good fun,” Lesley says.

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*The stony country of the Northern Flinders is renowned for its clean Merino wool.*





*Angepena homestead at dawn.*

It doesn't take long to get a fire going at Alioota Hut when the work is done. The outstation is meant for crutching, but with sheep numbers down, it's now more of a camp spot for family and friends.

"If you get good seasons, you'd be surprised at how many sheep you can grow in this country; Dad has had up to 10,000 head, but the most we've had is 3600 plus 1200 lambs, and now we're down to 500 Merinos and a few Angus cattle," Tony says. "It's not good cattle country here because it's so hilly, but you get really clean Merino wool out of this stony country without the sand or prickles, and we can still muster fairly easily as they go to the water."

Son Luke is fearless on a motorbike, and has noticed the downturn in outside mustering jobs, with other Flinders Ranges properties also feeling the pinch. "We would normally go mustering somewhere for two weeks, but now it takes a couple of days and it's done – everyone has pretty much destocked as it's so dry," he says.

Sarah, the eldest sibling, works in water treatment at Whyalla Steelworks, and Emily has also had to find work elsewhere, using her station skills to set up a horseriding school on the Yorke Peninsula. "There was no feed for the horses at Angepena, so I was lucky to be able to take

them all down to Minlaton as they're such good horses – too good to lose," she says.

Luke has his eye on Emily's worker's cottage on the station, but she's not ready to vacate entirely. "Angepena is one of the prettiest places in the Flinders; I'd love to live back here some day if there was enough work for us all," Emily says.

Tony and Lesley would be thrilled to see a third generation continue the dream. "We'll just keep battling on and one day things will turn around and we'll get back into running sheep," Tony says. "It's definitely one of the best spots around here – well I'm not sick of it yet, put it that way; I'm still discovering new places."

With its unique combination of hills, flats, forest growth, gorges and fascinating history, you'd be hard-pressed to find such a diverse landscape anywhere else in the Flinders, and the Nicholls family knows it's special. "We've got our own 4WD tracks and swimming holes when you get a good season – after rain, all of the creeks run clear water and are full of yabbies, and there's also quite a few yellow-footed rock-wallabies around," Tony says. "A lot of people who haven't been here before say the same thing – where else could you go that's as good as this? That's why we stayed."

