

## 1 SALISBURY PLAINS – JUNE 1850

During the late 1840s in central Victoria, particularly along the Campaspe, Loddon and Avoca rivers, increasing numbers of well mounted, lawless young men travelled around the various runs claiming to be looking for work, although generally not with genuine intent. The tradition in those days was that anyone turning up at a station homestead asking for work would be offered a meal and a place to bed down for the night. Almost invariably there was no work but the 'job seekers' did have the opportunity to spy out the land, to check what stock was there and if that stock was closely watched. There were limited opportunities as many station owners had considerable numbers of shepherds who were often assigned servants, convicted felons serving out their sentences. However, some stations did not have any assigned servants and only a few stockmen. Inevitably, such stations were regularly targeted by the horse thieves who quietly removed a horse or two from an isolated paddock which were later sold around Kyneton or Melbourne for ready cash.

Monro's station in the western district of Victoria, was, in the 1840s, a relatively quiet and peaceful place, much too quiet for young Frank. Now in his late teens, HE would very likely have been looking for a different and more interesting lifestyle, preferably one that didn't involve hot, dusty stock work with low pay. At some time in the late 1840s or early 1850 Frank left Crawford and headed back to the area near where he had previously lived with his family on the Campaspe. It was familiar territory for Frank and he knew that area and the surrounding stations quite well.

It was in mid-1850 that Frank and a group of like-minded young men joined together in the horse trade. They formed a plan to steal not one or two horses but a whole mob, which would be driven overland to be sold in a distant market. There were six in the group, known at the time as a 'horse stealing syndicate'. All were keen, it seemed like easy money and after all what could go wrong? They realised that they wouldn't need six men to drive off a large mob of horses so why not take two mobs? Three of the partners would drive one lot down to Portland, the others would head north, cross the Murray into NSW then east where the horses could be sold around Wagga.<sup>1</sup> The advantage of stealing horses rather than cattle or sheep is that horses tend to stick together in an easily managed group and they can travel quite long distances very fast – up to 50km in a day quite easily.

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<sup>1</sup> Morton, WL, *Adventures of a Pioneer*, (Ed. JO Randell) Queensbury, Melbourne, 1978, page 98.