

# The Wild Rabbit Industry in South Australia

## Introduction

While the main focus of Government and most landowners was the eradication of the wild rabbit, there were some who thought that aim was impossible and advocated for the commercial use of this plentiful resource. This article provides a summary of the wild rabbit industry in South Australia. Apart from a 2 year experiment in the late 1870s, the industry began in the 1890s and continued through to the early 1950s when the release of the myxoma virus decimated wild rabbit populations causing the industry to gradually become uneconomic and cease about 2 decades later.

The material covered in this article pre-dates the introduction of metric measurements under the *Metric Conversion Act 1970*. The weights taken from source documents and mentioned in the text have been converted from Imperial to metric equivalents.

## Background

Although rabbits arrived in South Australia in 1836, they did not establish in the wild but continued to be “farmed” for local consumption until they were released near Kapunda about 1870. From here rabbits spread widely so that by 1875 rabbits were established from north-east of Adelaide to the southern Flinders Ranges. They soon joined up with rabbits spreading from Victoria and New South Wales and started to over-run the land. By 1920 there were an estimated 10 billion rabbits in Australia<sup>1</sup> although a more considered estimate in the late 1940s put the number at between one and three billion.<sup>2</sup>

## Rabbits as a resource

In 1875 farmers around Kapunda were asking the Government for financial assistance in destroying rabbits as numbers were increasing rapidly and there was significant damage to crops. Other farmers, mainly those large and prosperous landowners, were fearing this would set a precedent that might lead to endless applications for similar assistance with other pests and diseases afflicting farming. They foresaw an opportunity that rabbits were not useless vermin, but could be turned to profitable business, by anyone with sufficient enterprise to do so. The rabbit was recognised as a popular food in England, and it was thought a market would exist far more readily than tinned beef or mutton. In addition, the skins would also be saleable, if properly prepared for market. To destroy and throw away what could be made an article of exportable value (meat and skins) made no sense to these entrepreneurs. A ready market for rabbit skins and fur from a large hat-manufacturing firm in London supported such an enterprise.<sup>3</sup>

From the 1870s to the 1950s (until the successful introduction of myxoma virus) wild rabbit harvesting was a significant industry as set out below. But a series of events, Government policy initiatives, business decisions and international competition led to a steady decline in the scale and value of the harvest of wild rabbits in Australia. Historically, the wild rabbit harvesting industry in Australia has been subject to wide

variations both in supply and demand with a number of factors influencing the demand for the Australian product. However, exports of rabbit meat from Australia did expand from 1988, when rabbit haemorrhagic disease (also known as rabbit calicivirus disease) appeared in Europe but was short-lived when that disease spread throughout the rabbit population in Australia 7 years later and again significantly impacted rabbit numbers. In 1990 the annual wholesale value of Australian wild rabbit products, including exports, was about \$9 million.

Rabbits have also been a significant subsistence food source for some Aboriginal groups. There are no Australian data on the impact of commercial rabbit harvesting on rabbit populations, but evidence suggests that the reductions achieved were too small and too localised to aid management.<sup>4</sup> However, the commercial harvesting of wild rabbits does seem to have had a short term impact on local populations but selective trapping soon enabled these populations to recover.

Rabbits provided employment and income, predominately in rural areas. Wild rabbits were harvested to supply meat for human consumption both locally and internationally, and skins for the felt hat and fur industries. Rabbit meat is now considered a high-value gourmet product, with the market price depending on consumer acceptance and demand. The farmed rabbit industry now dominates the supply of rabbits for domestic and overseas consumption, leading to a steady decline in the commercial harvesting of wild rabbits.<sup>5</sup>

## **Rabbit eradication or commercialisation**

Establishing a rabbit harvesting industry was seen as a practical solution to reducing their numbers, the next best option to trying to eradicate them. It appeared that processing wild rabbits utilised a food resource which would otherwise be wasted and the revenue to be derived from the sale of such food would be considerable. However, farmers in the Kapunda area, who had suffered so much from the rabbits, showed little interest in this enterprise with most continuing to support the policy of eradication.<sup>6</sup> These two policy positions, whether to aim for eradication or to use a pest species as a commercial resource, continue to be debated to this day. The ongoing tension between graziers and farmers who wanted extermination and the trappers and processors who wanted ongoing trade was exacerbated by governments requiring under various legislation that landowners take all reasonable steps to destroy their rabbits and in many cases prosecuting those who had not. As extermination generally meant poisoning there was a clear discrepancy between what both parties wanted.<sup>7</sup> From the 1870s to the 1950s both policies co-existed to some degree.<sup>8</sup>

## **The structure of the wild rabbit industry in Australia**

An industry for the commercial use of wild rabbits started to become organised in the 1890s. This grew quickly with the industry producing 2 primary articles, carcasses for human production and skins; the latter in turn leading to the secondary production of

hats and fur garments. Both carcasses and skins were exported in quantity. The whole industry was subject to large fluctuations caused by demands in the export markets plus seasonal conditions in Australia. The main activity was in the winter months – winter carcasses and skins being of much higher quality than in summer. The established trade season was April to September.<sup>9</sup> The rabbit industry could not have survived if its products did not sell. It is estimated that in Australia up to 20 billion rabbits were trapped or poisoned for commercial purposes – skins from 1830, preserving from 1870, frozen carcass exports from 1890 and, from European settlement, local consumption of rabbit meat.<sup>10</sup> It was the custom for rabbits to be handled in pairs joined by the hind legs. This was convenient for transport as they could be hung over a fence or a bar on a vehicle. Additionally, a buyer could judge the condition of two carcasses at once by holding each pair and assessing their condition.<sup>11</sup>

Once well established and until about the 1960s, the structure of the industry generally comprised the following major groups:<sup>12</sup>

## 1. The Rabbit Trapper

There were 3 distinct classes of trapper:

The **professional trapper** chose by experience the areas to work, for the density of rabbit populations and the quality of their meat and skins but often had to pay a premium for the right to trap good country. This trapper produced 2 articles, furred, gutted carcasses from trapping and sleeved skins from trapped and poisoned rabbits (the remainder of the carcass being abandoned). Sleeved skins were those removed from the carcass with a minimum of cutting. Which of these 2 lines the trapper decided on depended mainly upon the price received but also on personal preference as carcass trapping was much harder work. Trappers never attempted to eradicate rabbits from an area so there would be viable populations for future seasons.

The **rabbiter**, hired to eradicate or reduce the number of rabbits on a property, usually by the landowner in order to comply with statutory requirements. Trapping, poisoning, fumigating and ploughing warrens were methods used but the most common was poisoning. Use of this method resulted in sleeved skins. The terms of hire provided for the paying of wages but the rabbiter was usually allowed to retain what was trapped or poisoned. Again it was not in the interest of the rabbiter to eradicate the rabbit.

The **landowner** was not only required but usually desired to remove the rabbits and may have also relied on the additional income from rabbiting activities. As poisoning and fumigation were the principal methods used, sleeved rabbits were the usual product.

## 2. The Carcass Trade

The carcass merchant (or butcher) handled furred and gutted carcasses. These merchants were supplied by trappers who would string rabbit pairs trapped during the night on fences to be collected by carters using wagons and horses throughout a

dedicated area. Later these collections were made by motorised vehicle and then trucks usually based on a country freezing works or cool store. These later carcasses were chilled in the country and forwarded to the establishments in the city for skinning and packing or skinned in the country and the skins and carcasses packed separately and then forwarded (usually by refrigerated rail cars with a minimum load of 5 tonnes or about 2,000 pairs). The carcasses were chilled and packed for disposal locally or exported.

Disposal of carcasses was channelled through sub-dealers who distributed to retailers. The exception to this was the supply to canneries and large concerns such as hotels, large stores having a delicatessen department and large butchers. Canning of rabbit meat commenced in 1877 at Kapunda but was short lived. Numerous attempts continued at various sites with exports boosted during World War 1, mainly because of restrictions on refrigerated shipping space for frozen carcasses.<sup>13</sup> The exporter was almost invariably the carcass merchant and the export market was predominately with the UK. There were 4 lines exported: skinned carcasses – packed to net minimum weight frozen of 27 kg or 13-34 pairs; carcasses in fur – 12 pairs to the case; the “American pack” of carcasses in fur but headless, footless and small 15 pairs to the case; boned carcasses. The largest percentage of carcasses exported were in fur.



*Rabbits being delivered at Sonneman's Freezer, Renmark 1931*

*Photo: State Library of SA [B 60770]*

### **3. The Skin Trade**

Hide and skin dealers operated either in particular country areas or in the metropolitan area. The country dealer collected skins and then either sold to a

metropolitan dealer or through brokers. Skins were also sold privately to the fur trade or to hatters. The skins were dried and baled (about 5 bales to the tonne and 3,000 skins per bale) before sale. The skin dealer collected chiefly sleeved skins with most butchered skins originating with carcass merchants. Butchered skins were those removed from the carcass after gutting and were therefore more extensively cut than the sleeved skin. Sleeved skins represented about 80% compared to 20% for butchered skins.

The large wool firms were also brokers for rabbit skins. These firms mainly operated in Sydney and Melbourne but with branches in Adelaide. The majority of the skins produced in South Australia were sent to the Melbourne auctions. The brokers received skins for disposal mainly from the skin dealers, but also directly from trappers, carcass merchants and speculators.

Rabbit skins were used in Australia principally as the raw material for fur felt hats. The furrier used only the best skins and therefore did not actively compete with the hatter but did with the exporter. Small quantities of light and soft skins, known as “glovers”, were used in glove linings.

By the late 1920s the rabbit industry in south-eastern Australia (southern Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and eastern South Australia) was a large employer of labour in the country. Over 20,000 trappers worked full-time trapping for carcasses or skins, or poisoning for skins. Thousands were employed in numerous freezer works located in rural towns and capital cities, grading, sorting, packing, skinning and transporting carcasses by the tens of millions. Thousands more were employed by a multitude of skin buying firms located throughout rural areas and in capital cities. Hundreds sold (“hawked”) rabbits in the streets of cities or worked in small goods shops that retailed rabbits. Nearly 10,000 workers were involved in secondary industries making felt hats out of rabbit skins, pine boxes for the rabbit export trade, gelatine from skin scraps, and fertilizer and animal feed from the remains of rabbits unfit for human consumption. All this had an important economic impact on rural workers and the communities they lived in.<sup>14</sup>

Comparing the agricultural, pastoral and dairy produce of Australian origin exported from Australia showed that as an earner of overseas income, the rabbit industry was relatively important. For example, since 1938/39 to 1946/47 rabbit exports moved up from 10<sup>th</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> place in terms of export values, only exceeded by wool, flour and butter.<sup>15</sup>

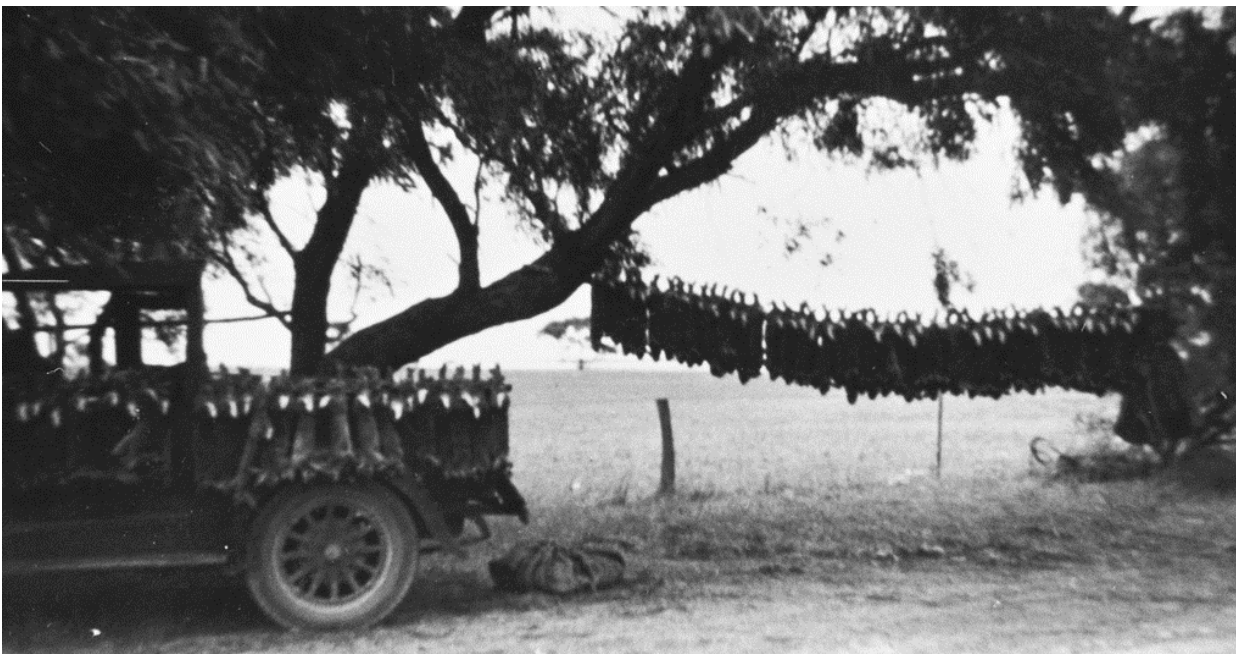
## **Rabbit trapping**

The majority of trappers were casual labourers who lived and worked in rural areas. Whole families rabbitied as a unit. Trappers were able to earn considerably more money each week than any other manual occupation. Rabbiting allowed workers to reside in one location all year and many local businesses became dependent on the trade.<sup>16</sup> Trappers, as independent suppliers, chose when to work and for how long, whether to

work for skins or carcasses or both, and who to sell to.<sup>17</sup> Rabbiting was often hard, isolated work in unpleasant conditions.<sup>18</sup> Rabbit trapping in agricultural areas reduced significantly following the spread of myxomatosis forcing trappers to work further into pastoral areas where conventional control techniques such as poisoning, fumigation and ripping were difficult to achieve in the short term, either economically or logistically.<sup>19</sup>

Trappers also had issues with landowners. A number of landowners took to trapping themselves whilst others extensively poisoned. This led to trappers in South Australia in 1903 going on strike demanding the works at Mt Gambier increase the amount paid due to this increased poisoning, thus limiting the trapping areas. By the 1920s skins became a focus for the rabbit trappers and many trappers left the carcass to rot in the paddock. These carcasses became a breeding ground for blow flies which again raised the ire of graziers. Where farmers had been paying trappers to clear their land of rabbits, during this decade they were now beginning to charge for the privilege.<sup>20</sup>

As the world started to get out of the Great Depression the value of rabbit exports grew by 30 per cent from 1932 to 1933. Because of this, trapping was more widespread again, energetically encouraged by state governments through labour exchanges where unemployed were sent out to do trapping.<sup>21</sup> In Renmark, Sonnemanns Limited started buying rabbits for the export trade in April 1932 and within a year had purchased 1 million. Different forms of trapping required experience in different methods and knowledge was important to long-term success in the industry and valuable to maximising returns. For example, trapping rabbits but not disembowelling them properly, left worthless carcasses.<sup>22</sup>



*Rabbits, strung up on a line, ready for collection Moorlands 1930*

*State Library of SA [B 59160]*

During both world wars, the mobilisation of men and women stripped the country areas of many trappers. In early 1944 the Minister for Commerce announced that workers would be released for trapping to sustain the industry but a worker shortage for the handling of the rabbits once trapped also required additional workers. However little resulted as the Department of War Organisation of Industry considered that trapping for rabbit carcasses could not interfere with normal rabbit destruction and it was doubtful whether the expansion of trapping for carcasses was a proper investment of the war time workforce<sup>23</sup> (again the conflict between pest and commercialisation of the rabbit).

Rabbiting ended the continual search for low-paid, seasonal farm work and deprivation during winter months. Although a financial drain for pastoralists and farmers across the country, the presence of rabbits in plague proportions proved to be a boon for thousands of workers in the bush from 1870 to 1950.<sup>24</sup>

## Rabbit meat processing industry

*(Note: From the available records it is difficult to differentiate in the text between what is frozen and what is canned or fresh. Therefore the best efforts have been used to below to make this differentiation).*

The commercial use of the rabbit in Australia commenced in the 1840s and increased dramatically after 1870. Rabbits were being sold in markets in Sydney, Melbourne, and Adelaide during the 1840s and 1850s.<sup>25</sup> The rapid spread of wild rabbits soon overtook this “farmed” industry. In 1877 the Rabbit Meat Preserving Company at Kapunda was processing 6,000 rabbits a day, with the canned produce exported to London.<sup>26</sup>

Based on this initial success and over the next 15 years, meetings were held at several towns, including Mt Bryan, Port Augusta, Millicent, Robe and Mt Gambier, to consider forming rabbit preserving works.<sup>27</sup> It is not recorded whether the Mt Bryan works proceeded but factories were opened at the other locations however, these only operated for a short time.<sup>28</sup> The viability of these factories in canning rabbit meat could not be sustained due the fluctuating markets, presentation and seasons (as stated above).

However, the development of freezing establishments and transport systems in the 1890s added a more viable option for the industry. The South Australian Government established the Government Produce Department to facilitate the development of perishable agricultural produce exports, provide fresh produce to local government institutions, and deliver various services to the community. See further information on the [Government Produce Department](#) operations. The Government Produce Department commenced export of frozen rabbits to the UK in 1896.<sup>29</sup>

Also in that year, 5 south-eastern District Councils opened a factory at Millicent to combat the rabbit, reduce expenditure on rabbit destruction, and generate local employment and business activity. This was both a canning and freezing works and once established was taken over by a private company the following year.<sup>30</sup> It is not



known when this factory closed. This followed on from a previous attempt with the opening of a rabbit processing works at Robe in 1894 but this had closed 4 years later.<sup>31</sup> Additional processing works in the South East were opened at Naracoorte and Kingston.<sup>32</sup> A further attempt was made in 1897 when the Mt Gambier Rabbit and Meat Preserving Company opened works at nearby Compton. In its first year of operation about 400,000 rabbits were processed.<sup>33</sup>



*Interior of the Rabbit Factory, Compton 1898*

*State Library of SA [B 16874]*

Rabbits were bought from a large number of trappers who worked within a radius of 32 kms. The larger rabbits were packed in crates and sent to the Government Produce Department at Port Adelaide for freezing and shipping to the UK.<sup>34</sup> The company canned rabbit meat and concentrated on either canning or carcass products depending on market prices. The company operated for just under 20 years and during peak times purchased around 4 million rabbits a year.<sup>35</sup> Later freezing works were established at Pt Augusta West, Pt Lincoln, Peterborough, Tailem Bend and Renmark.<sup>36</sup>

The period before World War 1 was one of low but slowly rising prices with exports fluctuating between 3,200 and 5,000 tonnes annually. The war reduced the average annual export to about 30% below pre-war levels although the average unit price had risen by about 80%. This could have been due to the significant 1913/14 drought and the availability of shipping during those war years.<sup>37</sup> In regards to the latter, in 1918



there was 14,000 tonnes of rabbit meat in store awaiting shipping space. However, a depressed international meat market after the war reduced UK demand for rabbits.<sup>38</sup>

Throughout the years of the Great Depression rabbits were a major source of sustenance for many and rabbit exports almost matched those of lamb.<sup>39</sup> By 1939 though, mobile freezers became available and these provided a boost for trappers.<sup>40</sup> By 1941, several companies had entered the business using mobile freezers and were actively employing a number of trappers.<sup>41</sup> From 1936/37 to 1940/41 South Australia was the second largest exporter of carcasses but was entirely eliminated from the field by the wartime control on refrigerated shipping space.<sup>42</sup> Some small quantities of frozen rabbits were also processed and stored at Port Lincoln between 1935 and 1941. A constraint was the need to have consignments of 5,000 crates to warrant collection from Port Lincoln by sea freighters<sup>43</sup>. Throughout World War 2 the domestic market took most of the available supply of rabbits for human consumption.

Following World War 2, South Australian exporters recommenced shipping consignments of rabbits with post war food rationing in the UK created strong demand. However, once the UK deregulated the sale of rabbits in 1950 profitability of rabbit exports to that country became marginal due to significant labour costs for packing, costs of shipping and rail freight, often resulting in losses.

### Frozen carcass export

The export trade in frozen beef and mutton from Australia to England commenced in the early 1880s. Once this trade became established, there was an opportunity to include rabbits but a combination of a lack of inland freezer works, problems with the railroad network, and continued opposition from farming and grazing interests hindered attempts to start an export trade. Gradually, though, access to freezer space increased and railway scheduling improved so that by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century a viable export trade was in operation. However, limited problems continued. The rate of rejection of carcasses, for example, was between 15 and 50 per cent due to slow trains, poor handling or delays by trappers.<sup>44</sup> By far the majority of rabbits for the export trade in South Australia came from the South East. Rabbit carcasses were forwarded by train, but these only left three times a week for the Government Produce Department export works resulting in delays in delivery and rejections.<sup>45</sup>

During a normal year season from April to September, the rabbits were placed in crates after being inspected by a Commonwealth inspector and then the crates were placed in the freezing chamber. The crates were labelled by the inspector as being fit for export.<sup>46</sup> By 1903, however, the Government Produce Department indicated that it could no longer transact frozen rabbit consignments on behalf of private exporters due to diminishing trade. That year there was an average export of 230 crates a week – the Department could cope with the 2,500 crates a day. The Department stated that the number of rabbit carcasses presented for export needed to increase otherwise it would have to withdraw from the market, requiring individual operators to transact their own

business. As such, exporters freezing and packing rabbits would be placed at a disadvantage owing to their distance from Adelaide.<sup>47</sup>

Despite this threat, the frozen carcass trade survived and gradually thrived. A recognisable rabbit carcass proved to be far more marketable than shapeless meat in a can. Frozen rabbit was vastly superior eating experience and in 1917 and 1918 Australia sent 50 million carcasses to the UK.<sup>48</sup> In 1918, however, the urgent carriage of American troops to Europe required Australian ships and no fewer than 32 insulated steamers were taken from the Australian trade, while another 28 had been transferred to the South Atlantic meat trade. This had a severe restriction on the frozen meat trade.<sup>49</sup>

By the 1920s local chillers sprang up all over the country but supply was outstripping the capacity at other critical points in the supply chain, such as cold storage space in the UK. The export of frozen carcasses, which was almost solely to the UK, thrived right through the Great Depression until World War 2 when the lack of shipping again intervened.<sup>50</sup> This was a result of the allocation of refrigerated shipping space to other commodities selected by the UK Government.<sup>51</sup>

Exports slowed after the release of the myxoma virus. By mid-1953 it was estimated that four-fifths of all rabbits in south-east Australia had died so exporters sourced their rabbits from central Australia, an area too dry for the virus-carrying mosquito and continued to export, albeit in decreasing numbers, until the early 1970s.<sup>52</sup>



*Portable rabbit chiller 1947*

*National Archives Australia: A1200, L1681*

Exporters in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, Tasmania and South Australia exported a total of 640 million frozen carcasses from 1901 to 1950.<sup>53</sup>

### Canned meat

In 1877 the Northern Rabbit Meat Preserving Company near Kapunda was purchasing up to 45,000 rabbits a month and 2 large shipments of canned rabbit were made to England with a fair demand existing within the State.<sup>54</sup> Upwards of 1,000 rabbits, which

were obtained from trapping, were canned per day although the works were capable of 5,000 per day.<sup>55</sup> The cans were labelled with paint by means of a rubber stamp at the rate of 600 to 700 per hour. However, the works did not remain viable and closed in 1879.<sup>56</sup>



*Canned rabbit in the preserving factory, Compton 1898*

*State Library of SA [B16872]*

As stated, other processing works were established over the next 25 years with mixed success, generally producing 1-lb (450g) and 2-lb (900g) cans. When in full production each of the Victorian and South Australian factories, which worked each year during the 'season', from April to October, purchased between 500,000 and 4 million rabbits a year for both canned and frozen products.<sup>57</sup> For the three canneries in the South East of South Australia that produced canned rabbit in the early 1900s, Wilcox & Company at Compton, the Empire Preserving Company at Naracoorte and Clark & Company at Kingston, it was estimated that 10,000 rabbits a day were trapped during the 'season'.<sup>58</sup>

Even so, the canned rabbit industry struggled in the first 20 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Large military orders from Japan (1904), the British Admiralty (1908, 1910) and from the British and Australian governments during World War 1 sustained the industry. However, most of these works throughout Australia had closed by 1920 and the British Admiralty removed canned rabbit from its list of service provisions in 1922.<sup>59</sup> With this loss of market, canned rabbit meat seemed to have ceased soon after.

Canned rabbit received a lukewarm embrace from consumers. It looked unattractive, tasted bland with scant resemblance to its origin, and too often consignments were spoiled as a result of poor preservation.<sup>60</sup>

### Rabbits for local consumption

Consumption of rabbit meat commenced in the first years of European settlement and rabbits were initially maintained to ensure a ready supply of meat. Fresh rabbit meat consumption accelerated after 1870. By the late 1890s, reports claimed that Melburnians ate 70,000 rabbit carcasses a week, while Sydneysiders consumed 30,000 a week.<sup>61</sup> The Adelaide fish and game market sold around 150,000 rabbits a year from 1900 to 1914.<sup>62</sup> Increased consumption of rabbit meat by Australians provided a stable market for rabbit carcasses and was not just from the larger urban areas but included rural areas as well. In the early 1890s, it was demonstrated that rabbit carcasses could be carried long distances by rail, which eventually opened up the rabbit infested country to the city market. Adelaide was dealing with a severe shortage of rabbits in butcher shops and for street hawkers.<sup>63</sup> Residents of Adelaide consumed between 10,000 and 20,000 rabbits a week during the Great Depression.<sup>64</sup>



*Rabbit hunting, c1931*

*State Library of SA [B 46475]*

By the late 1940s, Australians in the south-east of the country were eating 27 million rabbits a year.<sup>65</sup> Consumption spiked during World War 2. The cessation of exports resulted in increased local supplies of rabbit meat while supplies of beef, mutton and lamb were rationed.<sup>66</sup> An estimate in 1946/47 that showed commercial rabbit production



was 25,700 tonnes, exports at 7,300 tonnes (30%) and domestic production of 18,400 tonnes (70%).<sup>67</sup>

The Government Produce Department supplied rabbits to Government institutions such as hospitals and gaols. Volumes sold to institutions peaked during the Great Depression and rabbits were a popular and cheap meat source, often delivered to Adelaide households by travelling hawkers and butchers. Although the Government Produce Department ceased exporting rabbits in 1953 it continued to supply rabbits to Government Institutions.<sup>68</sup>

Following the release of the myxoma virus, reared rabbits could not be purchased anywhere in Australia except at a greatly increased cost, which priced them out of most household budgets. Chicken replaced rabbit on household tables from about 1960 onwards.<sup>69</sup>

## Rabbit skin and fur industry

Soon after wild rabbits had established in Australia, a trade in skins commenced. By the end of the 1870s the colonial trade in rabbit skins was substantial, with over 3 million skins auctioned in London in 1878 and close to 6 million skins in 1879. Many of these skins were used for hat making.<sup>70</sup> It would seem that commercial skin trade in South Australia was underway by about 1875 and it was noted that skins were much more valuable when taken in the winter months.<sup>71</sup> In 1894, South Australia exported 835,086 skins.<sup>72</sup>

The trade in rabbit skins grew rapidly in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century with some 4 billion skins being exported between 1904 and 1947. Prior to the Great Depression, the UK and United States of America (USA) were the main countries of export while local hat and furrier manufacturers took between 20-25 per cent of all skins each year.<sup>73</sup> With the coming of the Depression, the market for skins drastically reduced and prices tumbled but in due course prices and demand started to pick up helped along by a request from British importers for these skins.<sup>74</sup>

After the outbreak of World War 2, rabbit skin prices rose sharply on demand from overseas. In order that sufficient skins should be available in Australia for the heavy demand for military purposes and civilian hats, a scheme of marketing control became necessary with the Australian Rabbit Skins Board being constituted under the *Rabbit Skins Export Charges Appropriation Act 1940* to administer the scheme. In 1941 rabbit-skin prices rose considerably and to enable prices in Australia to remain reasonable, compensation was provided via a levy imposed on the export of rabbit skins, prices being closely regulated.<sup>75</sup> It was likely that in setting up the Board, the Government considered the effect such high prices would have on military supply contracts.<sup>76</sup> During the war period some 4 million fur-felt Service hats and 6 million civilian hats had been produced.<sup>77</sup> The Australian Rabbit Skins Board was abandoned in April 1949 because the steep fall in the price of skins obviated the need for further export control.<sup>78</sup>

The export of rabbit skins from Australia fluctuated over the war years from about 3,400 tonnes in 1939/40 to 6,123 tonnes in 1946/47. The skins were dried and baled (about 5 bales to the tonne and 3,000 skins per bale) and then passed to brokers or sold privately. Between 1936/37 and 1945/46 the average allocation of rabbit skins to end uses was:

Export	82%
Hatters	16%
Furriers	2%

As can be seen, demand was not greatly influenced by local usage but in response to overseas demand. Before World War 1 the bulk of rabbit skins went to the UK but that war reversed the position so that USA became the major purchaser. That position continued since that time with the UK slowly increasing. During World War 2 the USA was the market for almost all of Australia's surplus.<sup>79</sup>

*Export of Rabbit Skins from Australia – Country of Destination – Average Annual Quantity in Tonnes*<sup>80</sup>

Period	USA	%	UK	%	Other	%
1904-13	763	17	3,198	73	423	10
1914/15-17/18	2,143	74	622	21	152	5
1918/19-28/29	3,348	62	1,720	32	294	6
1929/30-32/33	2,042	55	1,530	42	120	3
1933/34-38/39	2,874	79	659	18	92	3
1939/40-44/45	4,016	96	54	1	114	3
1945/46-46/47	5,596	88	256	4	497	8

The rabbit skin and fur industry continued after World War 2 but the end was in sight during the 1950s. The reduction in rabbit numbers and changing fashions all closed markets. However, some trapping continued but by 2000, rabbit numbers had reached historical lows.<sup>81</sup> These low numbers impacted the iconic Akubra brand of hats as in 2017 the company announced it could no longer source sufficient skins in Australia to meet its manufacturing needs and was forced to import them. Akubra needed some 3 million rabbit skins a year, as depending on the hat, 10 to 16 rabbit skins were required to make just one hat. This situation developed because trappers were unable to sell the meat and could not make a profit from the fur alone.<sup>82</sup>

## The end

After 1950, the industry began its slow but terminal decline. The introduction of biological controls for rabbits significantly reduced wild rabbit populations and in turn influenced the viability of the wild rabbit export trade<sup>83</sup> and the 1950 release resulted in an immediate 60 per cent fall in numbers of rabbits processed.<sup>84</sup> In addition, competition in the carcass export market from the People's Republic of China after 1957, changing eating habits including the growth of the chicken meat industry after 1960, and changing fashions as men stopped wearing fur felt hats and women stopped wearing furs



reduced supply of product and closed markets. The accidental release of rabbit haemorrhagic disease in late 1995 and its spread throughout south-east Australia in the ensuing years brought what was left of the industry to a halt.<sup>85</sup>

## Commercial rabbit farming

With the introduction of biological controls for wild rabbit populations, enquiries began in South Australia in the 1960s on the keeping and breeding of domestic rabbits for meat through commercial breeding centres. The legislation was changed to effectively prevent such breeding centres by limiting the number of cages on any land to only one rabbit-proof cage which did not exceed 3.5 m<sup>2</sup> in area. This was because the breeding of rabbits on a large scale was considered to be inconsistent with the policy of destruction required under legislation.<sup>86</sup>

This policy position persisted through to the late 1990s when it was reviewed. The review determined that commercial farming of domestic breeds of rabbits for meat, fibre and pelts and the keeping and sale of domestic breeds of pet rabbits no longer presented a significant risk to wild rabbit management programs and therefore the keeping and sale of domestic breeds of rabbits was allowed. However, the keeping and sale of wild rabbits remained prohibited. The previous prohibition on rabbit farming was primarily based on restricting the development of a new commercial rabbit industry which could threaten current and future biological control programs against wild rabbits, however, the establishment of a commercial rabbit industry in most other States made this threat mute.<sup>87</sup>

Some ventures commenced but the decrease in demand for rabbit meat coupled with the expense of vaccinating farmed rabbits to protect them from viruses specifically designed to control their numbers caused most domestic farming operations to close.<sup>88</sup> It appears that there were at least 6 commercial rabbit farms in South Australia but at time of writing only 4 still operate for a boutique market.

## Summary

Rabbits were an important source of low cost protein for families, especially during periods of hardship like the Great Depression and World War 2. In South Australia, a number of businesses were established to take advantage of wild rabbit numbers by processing the carcass for human consumption, the skin and fur trade and other secondary uses for both local and export consumption, and as a means to partially meet the obligations imposed on landowners by governments to reduce wild populations. Neither aim was fully realised.

Most export businesses were not viable for long due to the great fluctuations in markets and prices from overseas and seasonal conditions affecting numbers at home. An exception was the Government Produce Department which continued to export despite these fluctuations and absorb losses from the more stable export products and from continued Government backing. Even the taking of huge numbers of wild rabbits

seemed to have a minimal impact on wild populations and likely undermined efforts to control rabbits.

However, farming and grazing did become more difficult and less profitable because of the costs of protecting crops and grazing land from rabbits. The industry that grew from the commercialisation of the wild rabbit did provide many thousands of rural workers with greater financial returns than other employment or supplemented that employment. Rural businesses came to rely on the rabbit industry. That anyone could go rabbiting substantially reduced rates of unemployment in rural areas.<sup>89</sup>

The wild rabbit industry would appear to have been a greater economic benefit in the Eastern States than in South Australia as the following table demonstrates:

*Rabbit Exports from South Australia as a percentage of Australian exports*<sup>90</sup>

Period	Rabbit Skins	Rabbit Carcasses
1904-13	7.3	3.4
1914/15-17/18	3.1	1.9
1918/19-28/29	1.6	1.0
1929/30-32/33	2.0	0.8
1933/34-38/39	2.1	13.7
1939/40-44/45	2.3	11.3
1945/46-46/47	2.8	0.6

To landowners the rabbit was a pest despite all attempts by people and the environment (drought, fire and floods) to destroy it. At the same time the unemployed found jobs, the poor had good cheap food and the entrepreneurs saw opportunity.<sup>91</sup>

Kevin Gogler, November 2023

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