

MARY SUTHERLAND

Mary Sutherland grew up on a cattle property in the Tambo district of western Queensland, a descendent of the Biddulph family, who were among the district's original settlers. When the time came to start school, Mary boarded at a hostel in Tambo so that she could attend the local school. Like generations of bush children, Mary was sent to boarding school for her secondary education.

When she finished school, Mary returned to the bush to jobs as a governess and jillaroo. She married a grazier and lived on a property near Tambo where her son and daughter grew up. Life was always busy. Mary drove the school bus, worked for the Ambulance Service and is still an ambulance driver.

In 1993, Mary and two friends, Charm Ryrie and Joan Sargood started Tambo Teddies. There were many challenges in the early days – it took many, many attempts to produce the first 'Teddy which looked like a Teddy'. It was a multi-purpose activity:

'... it was value-adding to wool, but we also needed something in Tambo to tap the tourists passing through, to make them spend a dollar in Tambo. We looked at projects we could run and someone suggested Tambo Teddies. We weren't really crafts-people. ... sewing sheepskin was so much more difficult than sewing with fabric... In addition to the tourist trade, we work on a mail-order basis, so anyone who hears about us can ring up and order a Teddy'¹.

Each Teddy is filled with wool, and many are dressed carefully in Australian idioms, including Drizabone coats, Akubras, complete with plaited leather stockwhips. Each Teddy is numbered and named for a property in the Tambo district. Each year, a special limited edition Teddy is made to commemorate a pioneering Tambo district family.

The Teddies were also used to take Australia to the wider world. As well as those purchased from overseas, a Teddy was sent to every country in the world. Special unfilled Teddies and koalas, called 'bickies' are made so that tourists can conveniently pack them to take overseas. Echidnas have been added to the range, and small, cuddly mice are made to use up scraps from the skins.

In the early days, the Teddies were made and retailed in part of the old Tambo Shire Hall, directly across the wide main road from the Post Office. The Council entered into the spirit of the business and erected a black and yellow 'Caution: Teddies Crossing' sign on each side of the road.

Tambo Teddies has produced and sold more than 20,000 Teddies. The business provides employment to the local community. Two women cut the sheep skins, four sew the Teddies, another makes the Bickie bears, five make the clothes, a local man plaits the whips, Vicki McIlveen trims the bears and helps Mary in the shop. The business also provides work experience to Scott, a young man with an intellectual disability whose computer skills have progressed to the point where he now types orders.

Tambo Teddies has left the Shire Hall and now operates from its own premises, a former shop in the main street².

Mary still has time for her other interests, clay pigeon shooting, her garden and golf. She is treasurer of her local club.

¹ Cited in L McDonald, p.136

² Interview with Mary Sutherland, Tambo, 27 February 2002.