

A Century of Change:

Recollections from the Hanson Family



1926 - 2026

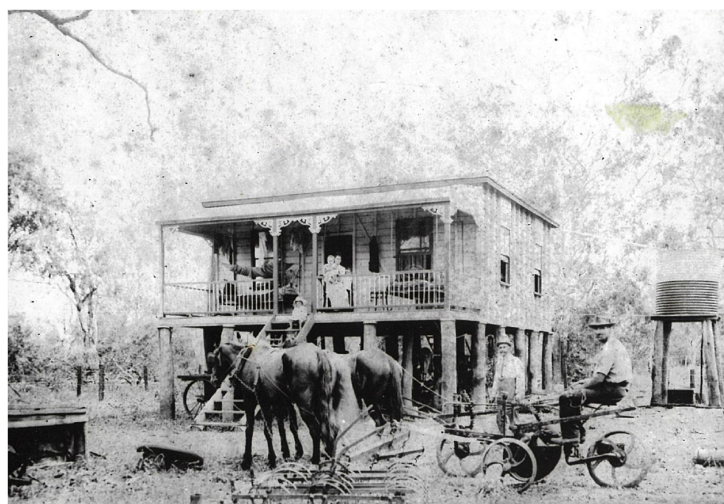
The history of the Burdekin sugar industry is one of resilience, innovation, and community spirit—captured vividly through the memories and records of the Hanson family, whose involvement spans generations.



Hans Victor Hanson

Hans Victor Hanson, born in Orsa, Sweden on 18 January 1880, arrived in Australia in 1900 aboard the Omrah. After initially leasing land at Highleigh near Gordonvale, he applied for a farming portion at Inkerman. In December 1911, at the Ayr Courthouse, he drew Portion 120—land that would become central to the family's story. By 1912, Victor, with the help of his father, had relocated a house from Charters Towers to the Down River property, where the family settled and began farming.

The early decades of the Burdekin sugar industry were not without challenge. Around 1927, a strike by wharf workers in Bowen halted operations when Inkerman Mill ran out of storage. In response, Inkerman growers—led by Victor Hanson—travelled by train to Bowen and personally loaded bagged sugar onto a ship, completing the job in record time and allowing the mill to resume crushing.



Original Hanson farm house

The 1930s brought a now-infamous chapter in agricultural history. Alley Hanson and Harry Ramsden Senior flew to Gordonvale in a Tiger Moth aircraft to collect cane toads from Meringa. These were released on Victor Hanson's Down River property in an effort to control cane beetles. While the plan failed in its purpose, the toads thrived and multiplied, becoming a lasting environmental legacy.

By the mid-20th century, sugarcane farming in the Burdekin was labour-intensive and relied heavily on manual processes. Alan Hanson, born 25 May 1940, recalls that between 1946 and 1956 the main cane varieties included Badilla, SJ16, Comus and E28.

Badilla, a noble cane originating from New Guinea and first planted in the Brisbane Botanic Gardens earlier in the century, was grown throughout the season.

Cane harvesting during this period was entirely manual. Fields were burned from around 1950 to remove excess leaf matter, and cane was cut using short-handled knives sharpened by hand. Workers pushed cane into long rows with cross breaks, and loading was done by hand onto trucks positioned on portable tramlines or horse-drawn wagons. By the mid-1950s, these older varieties were phased out, and long-handled knives became standard.

The introduction of new cane varieties marked a turning point. Trojan, introduced in the early 1950s, became one of the most successful varieties of its time. Known as the “mortgage lifter,” it thrived even on marginal land and supported many farmers through difficult periods. However, it eventually succumbed to red streak disease. Another variety, Pindar, showed early promise but was prone to snapping in strong winds and was quickly phased out.

Weed control in those days was labour-intensive, with farmers battling species such as guinea grass, nut grass, Johnson grass, convolvulus vine, and castor oil bush by hand or through cultivation. Chemical control was still years away.

Recollections from the Hanson Family continued

The variety Q63, introduced as Trojan was declining, proved to be one of the best the industry had seen. Initially dismissed due to its bent and twisted appearance, it ultimately gained recognition for its toughness and strong ratooning ability. Although phased out after around two decades, some growers—including the pest Board's Don Williams and members of the Hanson family—attempted to reintroduce it, albeit unsuccessfully.

Farming practices evolved significantly from the 1960s onward. Early farms featured short, angled rows, cross drains, and open drainage systems, many maintained by hand. Irrigation was achieved using tin tubes inserted into drains. Over time, new technologies transformed the landscape—graders, bulldozers, land planes, and eventually laser levelling and satellite guidance reshaped paddocks into larger, more efficient layouts. Plastic fluming replaced older irrigation methods, and mechanical harvesting replaced manual labour.

The year 1964 marked a major expansion in the Burdekin, with increased cane assignments, new farms, and the introduction of chemical weed control. Herbicides such as Roundup and Gramoxone, along with aerial and inter-row spraying, revolutionised farm management.

By 1969, hand cutting had effectively come to an end, replaced by mechanical harvesters. This shift dramatically changed the nature of farm work and reduced reliance on seasonal labour, which in earlier decades had included large numbers of migrant workers under employment quotas designed to protect Australian jobs.

The industry continued to evolve with new varieties such as Q117, introduced around 1990, which joined the ranks of all-time greats as a reliable, all-season cane. Meanwhile, advances in machinery—such as air-conditioned tractors—improved working conditions, although many older farmers had already suffered hearing loss from years of operating earlier equipment.



Last steam and first diesel locomotive in the Burdekin

The Hanson records also recall various industry events and milestones: a mill fire in the 1950s that caused limited damage; the use of excess molasses as fertiliser; the transition from steam to diesel locomotives in the 1960s; and the devastating fire at the Townsville Sugar Terminal, which destroyed large quantities of raw sugar, much of it from the Burdekin.

Through it all, the Hanson family remained deeply connected to the land and the industry. From hand-cutting cane and battling pests, to embracing mechanisation and new technologies, their story reflects the broader evolution of sugarcane farming in the Burdekin—a testament to adaptability, innovation, and enduring commitment across generations.

