

Pioneering a new northern industry



THE JAQUES brothers Nat, with son Jason, and Richard on their property near Mareeba.

THE PIONEERS of North Queensland have not vanished. Some may have faded somewhat, but the spirit that was required to turn sections of the Australian bush into virtual oases is alive and well near Mareeba.

By Danny Mortison

The waning tobacco industry around the district has recently been joined by a new neighbour — coffee — an industry second only to oil on the world trading market.

But to date only a few have accepted the new crop as a "goer," despite the confidence shown by local Department of Primary Industries personnel.

Two of the most optimistic people in the district must be Nat and Richard Jaques, former East Africans who have gambled their future on 42.6-ha lease of native scrubland on the Dimbulah Road west of Mareeba.

Hostile

The brothers, who were brought up on a coffee plantation in Tanzania, decided the hostile hills of East Africa was not the place to bring up their own families.

After a thorough look around Australia they decided the gentle rolling sandy loam hills east of Mareeba would provide the perfect location for their own coffee venture.

Their lease arrangements under the pioneer project scheme means that they may lease the farm for around \$1000 a year. However they also must spend some \$200,000 on development over the first three years.

Richard Jaques said the 17 degrees latitude provided the ideal tropical setting.

"We were looking for the control of the climate, with the good annual rains and the avoidance of frost and hail. We don't really want rain at harvest time or post harvest time when we have to stress the trees."

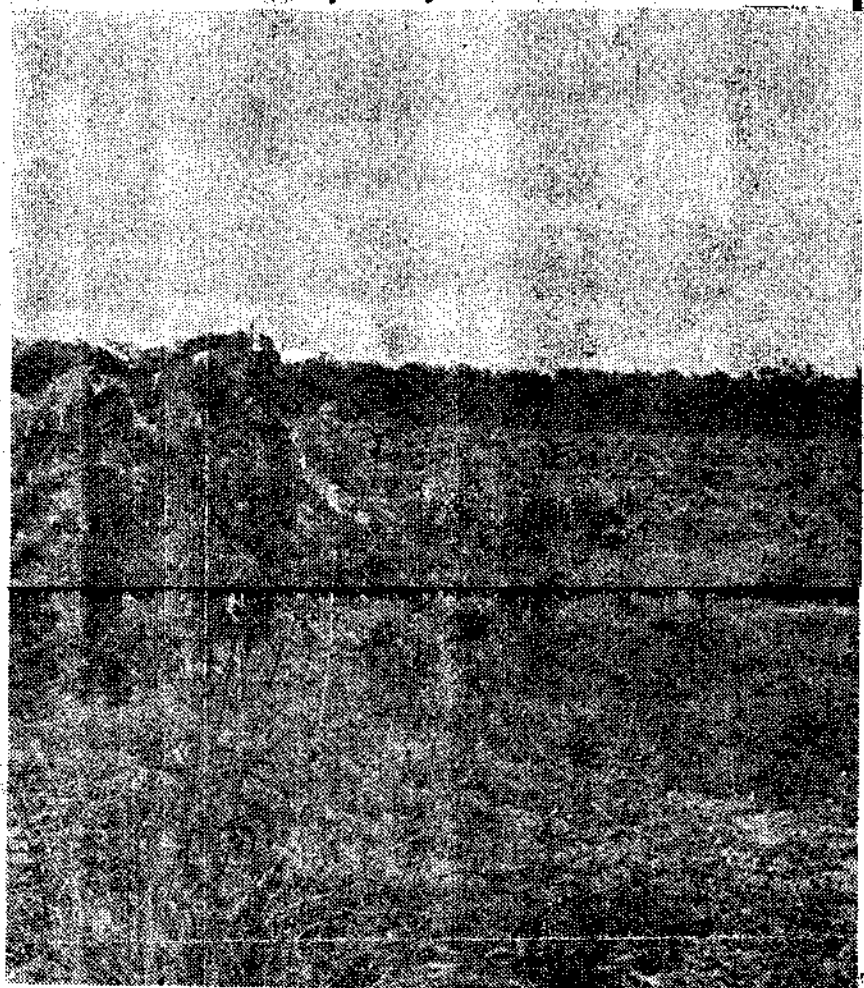
He said the trees had to be "stressed" to get the blooming of the flowers all at once which in turn then produces the coffee for the following year's crop.

"If you can get the flowers coming out all together, then you get the beans ripening all at the one time which you need for mechanical harvesting of the crop," he said.

"Since we're using mechanical harvesting here then we need uniform ripening of the crop."

Harvest

It is this mechanical harvesting technique which has allowed the crop to go ahead in Australia. Coffee is traditionally a third world crop grown in areas where labour is very cheap, therefore allowing hand picking. Before the mechanical harvesting technique was introduced, attempts to grow commer-



COFFEE trees growing on the Jaques property on the Dimbulah Road near Mareeba.

cial crops in Australia were short lived.

However, this did not stop the growers about the turn of the century gaining some recognition in London and Marseilles.

Queensland had some 160 ha under coffee from Kuranda to Buderim Hill but the price of harvesting compared with the world market price made it uneconomical in past years.

The Mareeba Coffee Estate plans to market its initial 35 ha of coffee in Australia. Their 90,000 coffee trees are expected to yield 150,000 tonnes a year which is just a drop in the bucket of the 30 million tonnes a year imported into Australia.

"We're hoping that the novelty effect alone will sell it for us," said Nat Jaques.

The first crop is due off the trees in 1983 and will represent the culmination of four years hard work.

The Jaques brothers have a unique trickle feed irrigation system to their

90,000 trees which is operated automatically.

The system was designed by Mr Graham Joblin, of the D.P.I.'s Irrigation Department in Brisbane and incorporates 130 kilometres of pipes.

The system can be set to water the entire farm in six different sections from a pre-set switching board in the pump room. With the dials set, the pump then irrigates each section for six hours drawing water from the Tinnaroo dam. This process is repeated every three days, except when its raining.

Seedlings

Most of the seedlings grown at M.C.E. were propagated from seed from Papua New Guinea while at least 20 per cent are from the Kairi Research Station on the Atherton Tablelands.

Richard Jaques says it is an expensive business to start from scratch and embark on such a project, but the industry could be a

good back-up for the many disillusioned tobacco farmers of the district.

Some tobacco farmers have already started to experiment by placing coffee trees between rows of tobacco.

Another coffee plantation has been established at Springmount with 40 ha planted and plans to increase to 400 ha. That particular property is using the more labour intensive furrow irrigation system.

There are five varieties of Arabica Columbian mild coffee being grown at the M.C.E. — all named by the Jaques: Kairi typica, Blue Mountain, Bourbon, Arusha and Caturra Red.

The families expect to eventually establish their own export processing plant and packaging plant on site.

It is an ambitious plan, but the Jaques brothers are confident it will come to fruition. They are excited at the prospects for the future.