

ALONG THE CANNING STOCK ROUTE

An account of the first motor vehicle journey
along the full length of the Canning Stock Route

by

R. J. Wenholtz

To
Chud and Noel,
Henry and Frank
and
belief in the Australian Legend.

Were those days as good as I remember

Or am I looking through the rainbows of my mind – again.

Do I see the coloured chapters of my life lying there

Or just the iridescent shadows of some black and white affair.

Kevin Johnson *Iridescent Shadows*

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Preface (2016)

I finished writing this manuscript in 1983. I sent copies to the three men who had helped Chud and myself most in our Canning trip: Frank Welsh, Henry Ward and, of course, Noel Kealley. In a naïve, half-hearted way I contacted a few publishers – none were interested.

Back in 1983 it was in hard copy format only. Last year, Phil Bianchi of Hesperian Press, converted the hard copy to digital format for me. He also digitised the maps. This process is not perfect and there were many “typos” that required correction. In September/October this year I finally “got around to doing it.” While I was reading through the manuscript I made some minor corrections – spell check found a few for me. (I am still not sure of the correct usage of the word “myself.”) The change from hard copy to digital version is not perfect: line separation varies and inverted commas are different styles.

I now have the equipment to convert colour slides to digital images so I can now include pictures. However, I foolishly took a box of my best slides to Africa in 1970. When our vehicle was broken into in Nairobi my “best slides” were among the items taken. So, I have no pictures of some of the more spectacular features of the trip - like Helena Spring.

My long-time, patient computer expert, Kevin Freund, converted my illogical group of computer files and folders into an easy-to-access format.

Of course, the big difference in 2016 is that Frank, Henry and Noel have all died in the last twenty years. So has Slim Dusty.

Since 1983 three good books on the Canning Stock Route have been published: *The Australian Geographic Book of the Canning Stock Route*, *Canning Stock Route* by Eric and Ronelle Gard (three editions) and “*Work Completed, Canning*” *A Comprehensive History of the Canning Stock Route 1908-2010* by Phil Bianchi. (Another book, of special interest to me, *Droving With Ben Taylor* by Len Hill was published in 2009). These books contain much more information on the Canning Stock Route than is contained in my manuscript. They also indicate that my knowledge in 1983 was incomplete and, on occasions, in error, and that there have been many improvements in outback travel. I also found myself giving points of view that were fashionable before 1983 but are not fashionable today. The only changes I have made is to soften some ill-judged comments on aborigines.

The books and maps now available are more comprehensive and more up-to-date than any information I could give to intending stock route travellers. Consequently intending travellers no longer contact me.

Navigation along the Canning is no longer a problem. There are dedicated maps of the stock route. There is a well-defined track – complete with detours and some signage. And there is G.P.S.

In 1967 – operating on our budget - there was little choice of vehicle beyond Land-Rover with deflated highway tread tyres.

Vehicle refrigerators had come on the market but we had found these early models could not withstand the rough ride through sandridge country.

The Commonwealth government's Division of National Mapping and Department of the Interior no longer exist.

Communication through the Flying Doctor network is no longer the connection for the people living in remote regions with the outside world. Again, satellite technology has replaced it.

Henry Ward's count of the number of users of the stock route was to the best of Henry's knowledge, but was incomplete.

While we rarely saw wild camels in our travels in 1967 and 1968, they have now reached plague proportions. (Australia now has more wild camels than any other country).

Several times I write of the inviolate nature of the desert. Global warming now casts some doubt of that belief.

Many of the place names I used from the Canning's map and the National Mapping 1:250,000 maps have been changed to correct aboriginal names. I am aware that I have given little attention to the aboriginal connection with this country. (I use "aborigine" rather than "indigenous"). I realise this is wrong. However, in 1967 and 1968 there was little evidence of indigenous presence. We saw no indigenous people. The evidence of indigenous occupation of the country was rare and old. I admit I did not do enough research into the indigenous aspects of the country. (I recommend *Cleared Out* by Sue Davenport, Peter Johnson and Yuwali, published in 2005, which describes the removal of indigenous people from the area).

I was "over the top" in my admiration of Ernest Giles. In 1970 I travelled (with Chud) in regions Giles explored. With my copy of Giles' *Australian Twice Traversed* we found water holes used by Giles. Reading his descriptions of features while looking at those same features, made me feel "close" to the man himself. I now realise his book may not tell the full story and the poetry Giles quotes was inserted when he was back in the city writing his book.

The conversations that are in my manuscript, while obviously not word for word, deal with subjects we did talk about while making the trip.

A point I wanted to make in 1983 is that I am not bushman, man of the outback, would-be explorer or a great traveller in remote areas. However, it was possible for a few years for me to be seen by others as this kind of a person. I have always considered myself "a country town boy" – as distinct from a "country boy" or a "city boy." Hence my interest – even while I was on the Canning - in popular music, movies, football, horse racing and reading the classics.

PREFACE (1983)

This book is an account of how, in 1968, Chud, Noel and myself made, what we believe to be, the first journey along the full length of the Canning Stock Route by motor vehicle.

Why should I now, sixteen years later, want to give an account of this journey? There are several reasons.

By reminding myself that I was a member of the first party to drive the Canning Stock Route - regardless of the value of this achievement - I try to assure myself that there is something about me which, if not unique, at least makes me a little different. It's the closest thing I have to a claim to fame.

Another reason I have never forgotten this trip is that I have never been allowed to.

Rarely a year goes by without an intending Canning Stock Route traveller, usually in some kind of personally modified four-wheel drive vehicle, seeking me out in suburbia for information on the Canning. With each inquiry I re-live my own trip to some extent and with each re-living something new about the trip occurs to me.

So now, I reckon I have a better understanding of what really happened in 1968. Embellished a little perhaps, but that can only make an account written now, more interesting than one I could have written immediately after the event.

Finally, although I strongly deny any accusations that I live in the past, these days I do find myself listening to the popular music of the 60s and early 70s, rather than to the music of today. My age is of such dimensions that I can no longer mark it on a lotto form. It is in excess of the age at which it is popularly believed "life begins". I have a tendency to speak of my past as "the good old days."

I try to resist, but the tendency persists and it frightens me. Many people who I regard as old have annoyed and then bored me when speaking to me of their past. If I delay writing the story of my Canning Stock Route trip any longer, I run the risk of annoying and then boring my readers.

So, best I begin now.

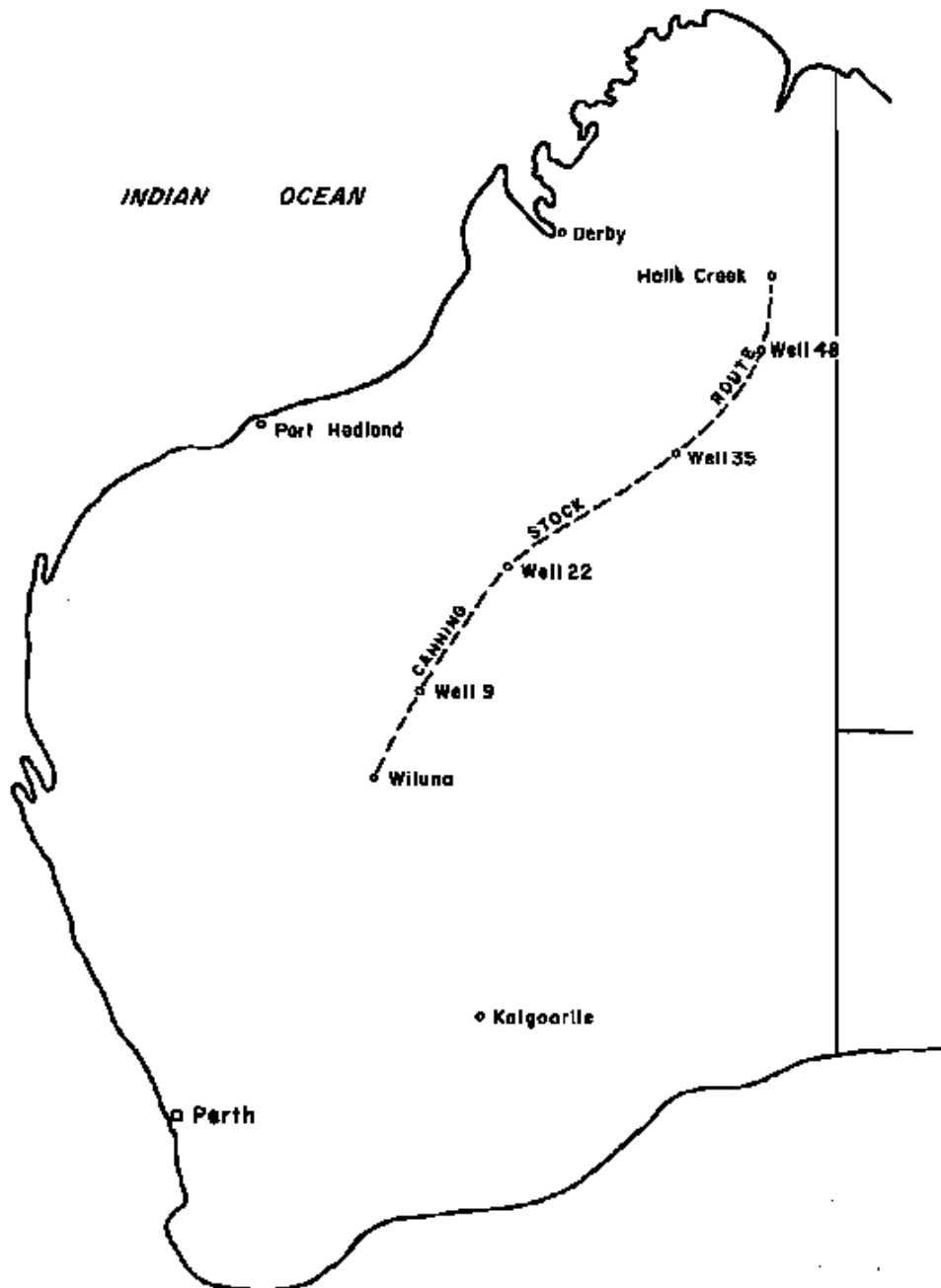
Units Conversion Table

Imperial to Metric

ten gallons	45.5 litres
forty-four gallons	200 litres
eighty gallons	364 litres
one inch	0.025 metres/2.5 cm
one foot	0.3 metres/30cm
ten feet	3.05 metres
one hundred feet	30.5 metres
one hundred yards	91.5 metres
one mile	1.6 kilometres
ten miles	16 kilometres
one hundred miles	161 kilometres
one thousand miles	1609 kilometres

WESTERN AUSTRALIA AND THE CANNING STOCK ROUTE

0 50 100 150 200 250 MILES
0 100 200 300 400 KILOMETRES



PART 1

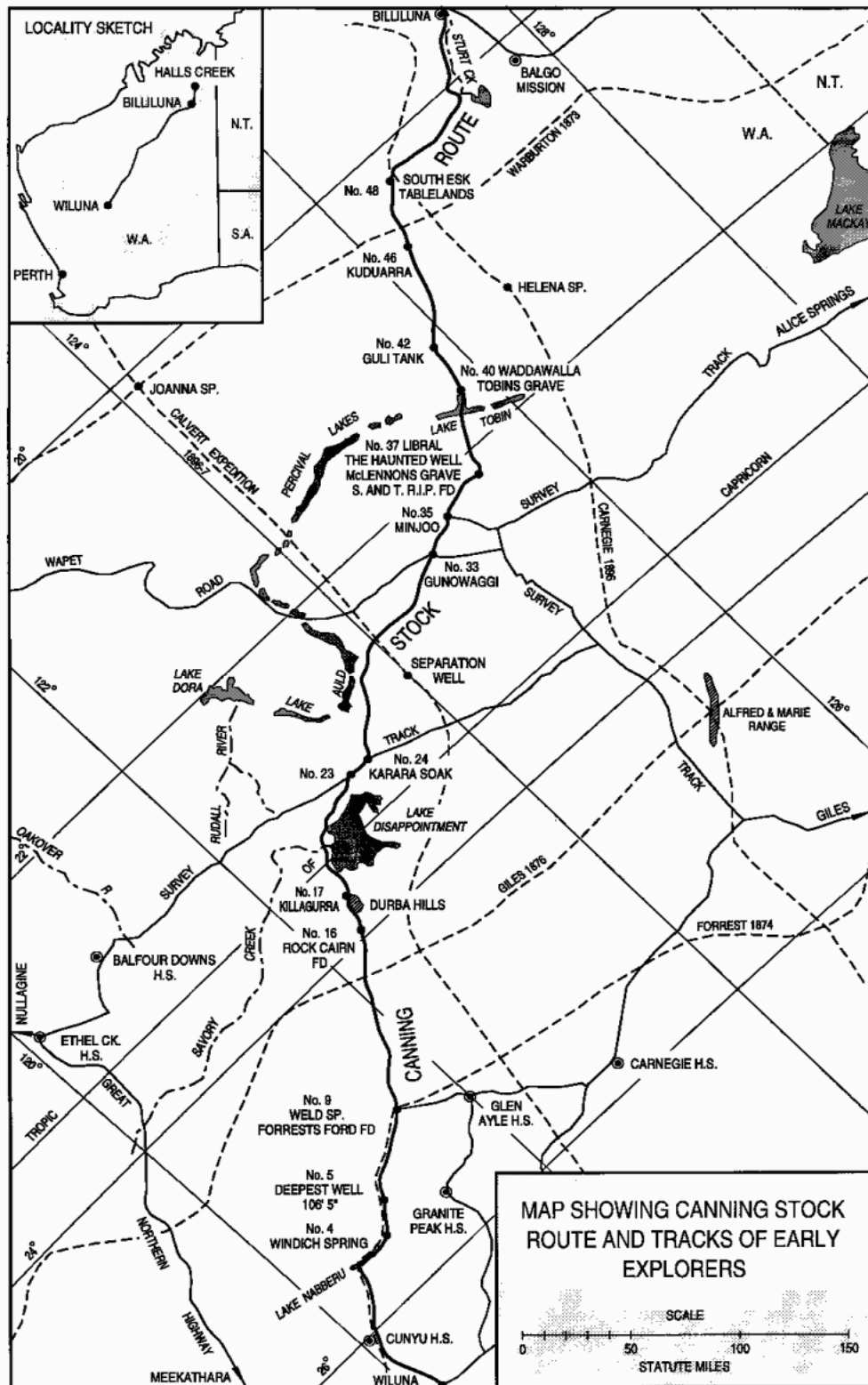
Getting There

Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans.

John Lennon

Beautiful Boy

CHAPTER 1



CHAPTER 1

I Meet "the Canning"

I first heard of the Canning Stock Route late in 1966. I was working with a government (federal) surveying team in the Northern Territory. Our team stopped at a roadhouse in Elliot and, as we sat listening to the juke-box, someone tossed me a well-worn copy of *The Territorian*.

"There's an article in that about the Canning Stock Route. That's where the work is next year, isn't it?"

Our work consisted of establishing bench marks for the Bureau of Mineral Resources' gravity survey. This gravity survey is an important part of the geological mapping of Australia. It began in the 1950s and continued through the 60s and into the early 70s by which time it covered the whole of Australia. In 1966 we had established the network of bench marks required for this survey into part of the Northern Territory. The following year, it was rumoured, the work would be in the desert regions of Western Australia.

The table service in the Elliot roadhouse was slow. I had plenty of time to read the article in the tattered *Territorian*.

The title was *Wanderings of a Desert Dogger* and although subtitled *A Journey Up the Canning Stock Route* I learnt very little about the stock route from it.

The author was a dingo hunter conducting a "one man survey of wild dog and game movements in the south-west corner of the Great Sandy Desert." A recent cyclone had scoured the area and the dogger was mainly concerned with the difficulties of travelling through the ravaged country in a Land-Rover.

The article gave no clear indication of where the Canning Stock Route was, but I did learn that it had not been used for several years. What impressed me was the dogger's description of his finding and recognising landmarks visited by Ernest Giles in 1876. He also described rock-holes, and soaks that he suspected had never been visited before - by anyone.

The dogger's enthusiasm shone through. In this desert undiscovered places and other places discovered by the early explorers, could be re-discovered - unchanged, by nearly one hundred intervening years.

I was interested. But I had just completed eight months of living out of tents and Land-Rovers and, as I was now heading south to Adelaide and then home, my mind was on other things. I soon forgot about the Canning Stock Route.

Back home in Canberra, I entered into the social activities leading up to

Christmas with very little thought beyond. Christmas is a good time of year. I agree with Dickens who reckoned, "there seems a magic in the very name of Christmas." This magic is enhanced if you have spent most of the year away from friends and family.

I was in a strong drinking group of young bachelors during those years. We patronised the unfashionable Civic Hotel in the heart of Canberra. The public and saloon bars provided a robust Australian style of drinking. The barmaids were ladies, no longer young, who had heard a good deal of talk in their time. They were hard to impress but they provided a good service. They could handle four or five middy glasses in one hand. They filled the glasses quickly - with a discreet head. They called you "love" and didn't expect you to pick up all your loose change. There were times when we were quite noisy, but only occasionally did we upset other drinkers. Rarely were we told to be quiet and never were we asked to leave.

As Christmas drew closer the tempo increased. We went over to the Civic more often. We stayed longer. We ate at a Chinese cafe. We even went dancing. Good fellowship abounded. Dickens would have approved. Then, on Christmas Eve, we all retired to the bosoms of our respective families.

After Christmas I went down to the south coast for a standard family fortnight at the beach. It was during the second week of this holiday that I began to wonder "what'll I do next year." And I thought about the Canning Stock Route again.

Even though our stock route trip (ostensibly the subject of this book) took place in 1968, it was in 1967 that the events occurred that led to the Canning Stock Route and the Great Sandy Desert becoming a part of my life. Early that year I made a decision or, more correctly, allowed a decision to be made for me.

At the office Christmas party my boss intimated to me that I would "go again." Most surveyors did one season away on this gravity work, not too many did two seasons and yet quite a few did three. The boss was lining me up for my third. I didn't say yes and I didn't say no.

Of course, I didn't know at the time that the decision I was about to make would so drastically affect my life. If I had known, I might have become more involved in making the decision. My resulting course of action was positive - I did go - but my reasons were all negative. My dilemma was not so much "what will happen if I do go" but rather "how mundane my life will be if I don't go."

My dissatisfaction with the sedate, urban life-style began during my second week at the coast. The fishing was not good. In previous years we had always caught plenty of school jewfish. A good friend took us out in his boat. Around three o'clock in the afternoon we would head up the estuary. Tingling with excitement at the prospect of the catch, we cracked all the old fishing jokes and laughed as though we had never heard them

before.

After an hour or so of pretending to fish for flathead or bream, we would move into the current and anchored in a spot we knew to be popular with the jewfish. We baited our hooks with nippers and let our hand lines run out until they reached the bottom. Then we pulled the line up a couple of feet to have the bait, we believed, in the face of the oncoming fish. Tensely, we would wait for the school jewfish to come.

When school jewfish, on the run and biting, pass beneath a small boat containing five persons with up to a dozen set hand-lines, they can cause a good deal of activity in that small boat. Lines go tight and run out in various directions, very often becoming entangled with each other. Reels rattle along the bottom of the boat and such niceties as landing nets are forgotten as slippery writhing fish are hauled on board into laps, lines and bait tins. The conversation becomes a confused mixture of oaths, exclamations and immature squeals of delight or disappointment as shaking hands try to re-bait hooks. It had to be done as quickly as possible in order to have the line back in the water before the fish move on. It's good fun.

However, in January 1967, the "jewies" didn't run. We spent several nights in the old haunts, talking of past glories - with slack lines. To make matters worse, young Stanley, the keenest fisherman of us all, lost a big one.

One old jewfish, who must have missed the news that Narooma was off-limits in '67, took Stan's bait. We could all see it was a big one. Stan battled manfully with it for twenty minutes, vehemently refusing all offers of help. He did well. I actually saw the fish in the water beside the boat. Old Les was ready to swoop with the landing net when, suddenly, the fish was gone. Stan slowly wound his line back onto his reel and dropped it into his fishing bag. He didn't say anything - no one did - and that was the only "jew" I saw that year.

Now I'm not saying I decided to go into the desert that year because the jewfish failed to run during the summer. However, it was while I was suffering the disappointment caused by the non-appearance of these fish, that I decided I needed to do something more than "stay around home."

So, when people said to me, "What are you doing next year?" I wanted to say more than, "Oh, just working around Canberra." Instead, I found myself name dropping. "I'll probably be working out on the Canning Stock Route in West Aussie." I was not sure where it was and I had no idea of what it was like, but no one asked any further questions and I was happy with the strong implication that I was too good for the local scene.

Back at work, I hurried over to see the boss and get something definite on where the gravity survey work would be this year. He explained:

"One party will be camped near Well 35, about half way along the Canning Stock Route in the Great Sandy Desert. They will work north and

west to connect to work done by parties camped on the edge of the desert. One near Hall's Creek and another near Marble Bar. The Well 35 party will also traverse east to connect to some existing work. They will then work south from Well 35 for a distance before moving camp down to Well 9, once again on the Canning, and work north to join the line commenced from Well 35. They will then work south to connect this line to existing work around Wiluna."

He smiled, "You'll have the Well 35 party." I didn't say anything but he knew I would go.

It was time I found out about this Canning Stock Route. I began with the *Australian Encyclopaedia*. This extract is from an old edition (1965).

"CANNING STOCK-ROUTE, the longest and loneliest stock-route in Australia. It extends from Hall's Creek in the Kimberleys 870 miles to the railhead at Wiluna in the East Murchison district, passing through some of the most arid portions of Western Australia. The route was discovered in 1906 by a surveyor, Alfred Wernam Canning (q.v.). His exploration took many months. There were no surface waters and he had to find practicable routes to travel stock from one, native well to the next. From June 1908 to July 1910 Canning again went over the route and put down and equipped water supplies at 52 places. By use of the Canning Stock Route, cattle grown in the Kimberleys can be marketed in Perth; they travel overland to Wiluna and are then sent by rail. The route presents too many difficulties for popular use and by 1950 it had largely fallen into disuse."

I was impressed. A little frightened perhaps, but impressed - and interested.

People I knew around home whose lives had not taken them beyond south eastern Australia assured me that the trip would be "a wonderful experience." They regarded such unknown and distant parts in the same light as country they read about in a novel or saw in a movie. Real maybe, but beyond their ken.

However, others who had travelled, and some even as far as the edge of the area I was bound for had plenty of information for me. They worried me. Many and various were the fates that could befall me on this assignment. None were very pleasant.

"The only thing there is to do out there is work."

"You know you can't drink that well water, don't you?"

"You'll never get Land-Rovers over those sandridges."

"You won't hear the Flying Doctor Base radio out that far."

"It's so monotonous. See one piece of the desert, you've seen it all."

"You'll never find your way through sandridge country. It's like a maze..,"

"Don't expect to meet any people this year."

And finally, "If you ever get back from this trip, you'll never want to leave Canberra again."

The sympathetic smiles and knowing shakes of the head that accompanied these statements, I found disconcerting. Fortunately, the aura of impending doom was largely dispelled by two books I read at this time.

One, *The Beckoning West* by Eleanor Smith is the story of H.S. Trotman, friend and workmate of Alfred Canning, and deals extensively with the Canning Stock Route. The other, *Australia, Twice Traversed* is Ernest Giles' account of his explorations in Central and Western Australia.,

Both books are true tales of adventure and discovery, featuring the heroic deeds of men in Australian deserts. Although these men experienced hardship, they never lost their enthusiasm for the country they travelled. They respected the desert but were not afraid of it.

Canning and Trotman, dedicated public servants, were happy to spend a major part of their lives working in the desert. Giles, a man from Bristol, crossed and re-crossed deserts and waxed lyrical about the country he saw. And it wasn't just these three. Many of their men often signed on for more desert travel once they had tasted the way of life associated with it.

What need had I to worry about venturing into this country now, with so many of the comforts and advantages of the twentieth century available to me? Gladly, I accepted the views expressed in these two books rather than those given to me by people whose knowledge was not based on personal experience.

By the end of March I was quite keen to work in the Great Sandy Desert. I took the precaution of visiting the boss to ensure that I did, for sure, have the Well 35 camp. (By this time I even knew that Well 35 was called Minjoo).

"Yes," he said, "You're it."

I am a great believer in preventive medicine. So, although I was keen to go, I felt I should take a good dose of the city before leaving. I went to Sydney for the two weeks straddling Easter.

Someone in Canberra told me to visit the Mitchell Library in Sydney for more information on the Canning Stock Route. I had no experience of libraries. I located the building and entered nervously. I had no confidence and received little help

I was directed to a room of boxes and cards where everyone, except me, seemed to know exactly what they were doing. I couldn't distinguish the librarians from those using the library. Rather than make a mistake and ask the wrong person for help I pretended I knew exactly what I was doing.

On my own, I found "Canning" in the card index. But it was "George" not "Alfred." My biro seized up. A well-dressed man behind me sighed impatiently. He wanted to look at the very box of cards that I had out. I pretended I had found the information I needed. I pushed the drawer shut and moved away. I looked carefully at the piece of paper on which I had written

the word "Canning." Then I left. It was too forbidding.

I was more relaxed at Randwick where I saw Galilee win the Sydney Cup. He was a handsome black. He trailed the field one out from the fence all the way to the top of the straight. Then he moved wide, majestically, and strode past the rest of the field - no trouble at all.

I had a good day. I backed three winners and one of them - another black, named Calmness was at 25 to one. Later, in the city, a barmaid told me I was a kookaburra.

"Why," I asked.

"You must be protected, like a kookaburra, if you backed Calmness today," she told me.

In the week that followed I swam at Bondi and did the rounds of the picture shows. I knew I would have little or no chance to surf or see movies in the following months. I saw *Dr Zhivago*, *Zorba the Greek*, *Alfie* and *Khartoum* - good movies all.

Young Stan came down and we went to see "our" team play football (Rugby League). They were underdogs on the day we saw them, but that's the way we prefer it - especially when they are going well. At that time we had a good prop-forward from Queensland. His name was Day. He specialised in breaking a couple of tackles at the edge of the ruck and passing to one of his team-mates who would come racing down the outside of the ruck, anticipating the break.

We scored two tries from this ploy and Stan and I were bouncing in our seats as our team led the mighty St George by 12 points to 4 with 20 minutes to go. Then things changed. For the remainder of the game it seemed to us that our team never had the ball. St George made attack after attack. Their full-back, Langlands, was big and fast with a prodigious side-step. Stan and I groaned whenever the ball was in his vicinity. We were afraid to watch.

Inevitably, the breaks came for the Saints. They scored twice and despite our protests brought the score up to 12 all. Full time sounded and we didn't know whether to feel relieved or disappointed with the result. But what was this? A free kick to St George - and not very far from the posts. We sat quietly now, suddenly practising Christians, and whispered fervently, "Please God let it miss."

It may have been frailty of man rather than divine intervention, but the kick was unsuccessful. Our will-o-the-wisp winger, Les Hanigan, caught the ball. We jumped to our feet as he commenced to wind his way through the weary St George players. When confronted by the big full-back, our Les kicked. Alas, the kick screwed the ball into the arms of one of St George's favourite sons, Johnny Raper. He made progress into our territory. It looked bad. It was a moment of high drama. To this day I believe Stan and I would have confronted the redoubtable Mr Raper before he reached our try line had not several of our maroon and white heroes succeeded in putting him down

first.

What a finish! What a game! Ah, this was the stuff of life itself. Hold it. Then why was I consigning myself to the Great Sandy Desert for the rest of the football season and then some? Too late, the dye was cast. The decision was made. And what was more important, my name was on the official forms. I had to go. I went.

It was great.

During my previous two years of gravity survey work, I had traversed areas in tropical, almost tourist, Australia: Cape York and Arnhem Land. But, for me, these two trips with all their attractions pale into insignificance when compared with the time I worked in the Great Sandy Desert.

On my return to Canberra, I sought out those whose advice I had tried to ignore early in the year. Now I had some information for them. Information based on recent, first-hand experience.

"The only thing to do out there is work."

We lamented the fact that we had to work six days each week as this only left us one day a week for exploring. We searched for wells, rockholes and claypans in our own time. We rarely found anything - we didn't have enough time. We saw low hills on the horizons that cried out for investigation, but horizons have the knack of receding and even disappearing in sandridge country - you need plenty of time to reach them. Passive recreation in the desert is also very time-consuming. Like the ocean, the desert demands solitary, infinite contemplation.

"You know you can't drink that well water, don't you?"

The quality of well water varies from well to well and the first water we took from Well 35, near our base camp, did taste bad. I worried about the effect continued consumption of it would have on us. I thought vaguely about water-purifiers. But no, the second tank-full of water we took from the well tasted better. The men noticed as they pumped water from the well that new water rushed in through the sides to maintain the subterranean level. We learned to pump the well almost dry and then wait for it to re-fill before taking water for our tanks. This "new" water was pure and clean - and beautiful - as only desert water can be beautiful.

"You'll never get Land-Rovers over those sandridges."

I was never too worried about this one. I had reports of other surveyors who had driven vehicles through sandridge country. Sure, there are areas in the desert that may never be crossed in motor vehicles. However, such areas are never so extensive that they cannot be driven around. Every sandridge has a weak point at which a crossing can be made.

"You won't hear the Flying Doctor Base radio out that far."

True, there were many days on which our portable Traegar transceiver

could not be heard at the Flying Doctor Base in Port Hedland. However, another of our survey parties, camped near Marble Bar, relayed our messages to the base in Hedland on their portable. When this party could not help us, the people on the station country, who also used the Flying Doctor network, co-operated with the Base to get our messages through.

"It's so monotonous. See one piece of the desert, you've seen it all."

The deserts of Australia (and, I suspect, the world) are never monotonous. Historians and geographers, writing in the city, often claim they are, but it's very rare to find a person who has actually travelled in deserts use the word monotonous to describe them. Demanding, dangerous, exhausting, testing, uncompromising, relentless, time-consuming - but rarely monotonous. In sandridge country one is continually confronted with the challenge, "What lies over the next ridge?"

"You'll never find your way through sandridge country. It's like a maze."

We use aerial photographs on our gravity survey work. Sandridges are clearly defined on these photographs. Every curve, swirl, loop, terminal and Y-shaped branch is clearly visible. Finding your way through sandridges with aerial photographs is simpler than doing the children's maze puzzles in the Sunday comics. For, unlike the children's puzzle, you are quite free to cut over lines (i.e. sandridges) if you think going around will take you too far out of your way.

"Don't expect to meet any people this year."

From our base camp at Well 35 we spent one memorable weekend in the Pilbara country. We had one day at the Ironclad Hotel in Marble Bar and the next night the locals organised a barbecue for us at Warrawagine Station. Later in the year, when we moved south to the station country north of Wiluna, we found more "homestead hospitality." We even met attractive, eligible young ladies. Friends I made on that trip I retain to this day.

"If you ever get back from this trip, you'll never want to leave Canberra again."

This was the piece of advice I was most anxious to refute. Back in Canberra in October 1967 the only thing I was sure of was that in 1968 I wanted to go back to the Canning Stock Route and the Great Sandy Desert - in my own time - at my own expense. The reason was quite simple. I was captured.

The people I'd met, the country and its history had captured me. I felt cheated that the work of the survey had allowed me to see only a small part of what the country had to offer. I hadn't even seen all the stock route. We only ran traverses from Wells 5 to 23 and from Wells 35 to 45 and even on these sections we had not found all the wells.

I wanted to go back. Friends and relations assumed I had found either gold or a girl in Western Australia. Neither was true, but I did have a good reason to

go back. Different people and organisations had travelled sections of the stock route in motor vehicles, but other sections had never been driven. To my knowledge, no one - but no one - had ever taken a motor vehicle the entire length of the stock route, Wiluna to Halls Creek or Halls Creek to Wiluna, in one concerted effort.

However, the idea of "driving the Canning Stock Route" was not mine. In the survey party based near Marble Bar in 1967 were Chud and Noel.

Chud, a bank manager's son, grew up in country towns throughout New South Wales: an authentic Australian environment of camping, shooting and fishing. Surveying was an obvious choice of career for him. He became interested in the surveying tradition and the closely allied history of Australian exploration. To say he was a Land-Rover enthusiast is an understatement. In the 1960s, Chud believed any weekend spent in town was a wasted weekend.

He was a natural for gravity surveying work in the remote areas of Australia - for Chud it was a case of the remoter the better. When Noel joined Chud's party in 1967 they found they had a good deal in common.

Noel, another Land-Rover man, was a seasoned traveller as well. Although he was approaching his fifty, he retained a passion for visiting new places and re-visiting old ones. Noel had worked for several years in Wiluna and for many years had contemplated a journey along the Canning Stock Route.

Chud and Noel worked together in the Pilbara. They ran traverses east into the Great Sandy Desert. They located Christmas Pool - a rockhole visited by Trotman and mentioned in *The Beckoning West*. They spoke with station people living on the edge of the desert and yarned with each other through smokos, over meals and around camp fires. They realised that no one had ever driven a motor vehicle the entire length of the stock route. They saw that it could be done and that they could do it. They knew how I felt about the country. Was I interested in coming with them?

Was I evah.



Learning to cross sand ridges 1967



Well 35 Minjoo with our pump in position 1967

CHAPTER 2

More Pre-amble and Some Preparation

I was still in camp near Well No. 9, trying to finish the 1967 traverses, when I received a letter from Chud and Noel outlining their plan to drive the Canning Stock Route in 1968.

The idea of coming back, without the responsibility of a survey party and a programme of work, appealed to me.

The end of the year is a testing time in any survey camp. The best of friends in the best of camps can "fall out." The end of the work is in sight. The prospect of going home is only weeks away. Delays of a couple of days at this time can cause more trouble and ill-feeling among the men, than delays of a couple of weeks can cause earlier in the year.

Our camp at Well No 9 was in bad shape. The mechanic was in Meekatharra hospital with first degree burns on his legs - the result of a camp accident. One of our top men had obeyed a telegram from his girlfriend in Sydney directing him to "come home." The three married men in the party were becoming, what is more politely called "a bit toey." So the other two single men and myself were having a hard time holding the party together long enough to finish the work. We received help from an unexpected quarter - the locals.

Well No. 9 is on Glen-Ayle Station. Glen-Ayle marks the southern limit of the Great Sandy Desert. It is fringe country. It is the creation of Henry Ward and his family. As Henry's land includes a section of the Canning Stock Route, he was interested in the work we had done further north. He became interested in us and saw that our party was in trouble. He became the friend of every one in our camp. He extended the hospitality of his home to our ailing personnel.

Henry fits my image of the typical Australian cattleman. He is a big man with a weather-worn face and strong blue eyes. His hands are enormous and work-hardened. He wears his hat so far forward that the brim covers most of his face. Rather than adjust the position of his hat, he tilts his head back in order to look you in the eye. He loves his station.

He liked me because I liked the country and talked of coming back to see more of it. He released me from my worries about the job and the men, with his stories about the Canning Stock Route. As a boy, working with his uncle, he had seen Canning with his well re-conditioning team in 1930. When I told him of the proposed trip, he was enthusiastic. He immediately started suggesting ways in which he could help us.

I felt that his enthusiasm gave us some kind of approval for our trip. I realise Henry's tenure on the Great Sandy Desert is very tenuous and certainly confined to the southern extremity, but he knew more about the Canning Stock Route - both from published sources and first-hand experience - than anyone

else I had met. His encouragement assured me that it was not presumptuous of us to consider driving the route.

I recall quite clearly taking thy leave of Henry in 1967. Meeting and farewell scenes often stand out as clearly as beacons in my memory while more spectacular, and even traumatic, events have melted into the shadow of the past.

When we finally finished our work and the order came for us to leave, we dismantled the camp and loaded it onto the vehicles haphazardly, but quickly. We were soon on the road. Although our party travels in convoy, when the married men are in front and on the way home, the interval between vehicles can stretch to thirty miles.

Our way back to Perth was via Glen-Ayle homestead. Travelling last in the convoy, I was still miles short of that homestead, when I met Henry, in his Land-Rover, travelling out to a mustering camp. The road consisted of only one set of wheel-tracks. We both pulled over so that each vehicle occupied half of the road. Our right elbows, resting on the window sills, almost touched. We spoke of the weather, the road to Perth, the location of fresh cattle tracks I had seen that morning and the likely temperature of the beer in the pub at Wiluna.

Without any introduction to the subject, Henry asked, "Well, are you really coming back next year?"

I said, "Yes.... I think so."

"Good," he replied, "Let's know when you have any definite dates and I'll start to get things organised at this end."

We were obliged to get out of our vehicles to shake hands. I watched Henry drive off. When I tried to do the same my starter motor would not turn. I bludgeoned it with a small sledge-hammer. The engine started and I discovered I had no clutch. After a shuddering start the Land-Rover was in motion. Anxiously, I drove until I caught the rest of the party.

Such incidents of travel are not unusual in remote country with hard-worked vehicles. However, when they do occur, they still come as a surprise and on this occasion I recall thinking, "Are the powers-that-be trying to tell me not to come back?" I laughed at myself but I never laugh at the powers-that-be.

Wiluna may be a gaunt, sleepy town but its residents do not share these characteristics. By what is known locally as "the mulga mail" the people I spoke to in town were aware of my intention to return to the desert "for fun." The publican, a large taciturn man named Barney, said nothing. He looked at me as a doctor looks at a patient suffering an incurable disease.

In Wiluna I met Peter Muir, the very desert dogger whose article I had read in the Elliot roadhouse the previous year. He had travelled up the Canning Stock Route as far as Well 17 and was keen to go further.

"I hear you're planning a private trip up the stock route next year. I'd be a handy man to have along," he told me.

I believed him. His business-like approach and appearance unsettled me. His old hat and his bare, callous-hardened feet testified to many days - no years - spent in the outdoors, relying on his own resources. In spite of what I regarded as my success in sandridge traversing during the year, I felt like a green-horn, a pretender, in Peter Muir's presence. I looked respectfully at his strong, wiry figure. I was sorry; my friends Chud and Noel were the organisers. I couldn't help him.

I could not see myself, an easterner, scrambling over sandridges in my normal desert attire of shorts and thongs, with map and biro, showing the way to this seemingly authentic man of the desert. I left Wiluna for Perth.

Perth is a country town that has become a city without losing too many of the virtues of the country and without acquiring too many of the vices of the city. A good place for me to rest up and recover my urban equilibrium. I stayed in Perth for a short holiday before returning home.

I surfed at Scarborough and went to the races. I also saw several movies but I cannot recall their titles. I was too busy searching for information on the Canning Stock Route.

At that time, the Battye Library in Perth stored all the information on the Canning Stock Route. It was only a small library and the manner in which the only librarian on duty directed me to the Canning information led me to believe she had received many requests similar to my own.

I made copies of everything I thought relevant.

One day I searched, in vain, through the old East Perth cemetery for the graves of two drovers who had been speared by blacks on the Canning Stock Route. Their bodies were said to have been transported back to Perth for burial. The cemetery caretaker was an old man. His hearing was not good. I don't think he knew where the drovers were buried.

I met Doug Tomlin, an historian-draftsman with the State Lands Department. He gave me a copy of his own article on the history of surveying in Western Australia - more data concerning Canning and his stock route. I searched the local bookshops for publications on the Great Sandy Desert - without success. I was ready to fly home when Henry Ward rang me. He had come to Perth earlier than expected. He was going to call on his old friend Eleanor Smith, the author of *The Beckoning West*. He suggested I come along.

While she was researching *The Beckoning West* Eleanor Smith had travelled to Glen-Ayle. Henry drove her out to Well No. 9 and a few miles further on to show her a sandridge. She had maintained a friendship with the Glen-Ayle people ever since.

Mr Smith, Henry told me, was a successful businessman. The Smith house was a large two-storied building with extensive, leafy grounds in a

park-like suburb of Perth. Mrs Smith, an elderly lady, rushed out to greet the Wards as their car pulled into her driveway.

I was thrilled to meet a “real live” writer. Mrs Smith displayed an undiminishing vitality for the entire day. She did most of the talking but was never boring. A wide variety of topics came up, were treated and dismissed as others appeared. She spoke of her friend Ernestine (Hill). She told me about writing *The Beckoning West*.

We sat in the same room, in the same chairs and beside the same hearth, that she and Trotman, or Trottie - as she called him, had sat. He, relating to her, the events that were to form the basis of her book.

The strength of *The Beckoning West* for me was not simply that the facts were assembled and presented in a readable manner. Mrs Smith also managed to translate Trotman's story of men among men in a harsh lonely environment without reducing the men to uncouth, unfeeling stereotypes or reducing the environment to a landform created for the sole purpose of frustrating human endeavour. In her talks with Trotman, she recognised some of the fine undercurrents of manly behaviour that come to exist in a party of men brought together to perform a demanding task.

Mrs Smith recognised the significance of “you can't expect to have it bubbling up your nose all the time.”

One of Canning's men who, on the way north, complained of the beer being flat in a Meekatharra hotel, received this reply from the publican. Throughout the stock route survey, this sentence - “you can't expect to have it bubbling up your nose all the time” - became the party's signature line. In moments of stress and hardship one or other of the men would repeat this line and immediately the tension would ease.

Most groups of working men have such a line. It is usually born from their own experience and takes on a meaning beyond that conveyed by the string of words. The line becomes a uniting force among the men. In the company of outsiders members of the party use their signature line as a kind of private joke. It sets them apart in a crowd. They like to see the puzzled looks on the faces of outsiders trying to work out what it means.

I offered Mrs Smith my desert-dirtied copy of *The Beckoning West* for her autograph. With a flourish, she wrote:

"With good wishes and hoping you will complete the entire Route next year. You lucky man the dust of the desert has given this volume a special significance."

And this was the day I decided - definitely - I would do the trip.

To date it had all been talk - with only a little writing. Chud, Noel and myself had considered alternatives, consulted various persons, studied conditions and written several letters. We had even made some vague proposals, but nothing really positive had been achieved. We had made no binding commitment.

Noel extracted this commitment from me after my day with Eleanor Smith. His timing was excellent. I was in a state of euphoria after my day of Canning Stock Route talk. Chud had transferred to Darwin on another survey assignment. His party, including Noel, had returned to Perth. I was having a quiet beer at "The Bo" when Noel joined me.

"How are you?"

"Fine," I replied.

Noel is a very straight-forward conversationalist, he looked at me and asked, "Are you two (Chud and me) bastards really going to make that trip next year or is it just a load of bull-shit?"

I rushed my answer. "It's no bull-shit. It's on."

I was committed. I felt as though I had signed my name to a contract. Noel accepted my statement with a slight nod of his head. There was no way I could back out now. Noel is the kind of man one does not "muck around with." From that moment the trip was definitely on as far as I was concerned.

Planning now became more serious and, because it was for real, it became more thorough. No more reckless, gay abandon as we yarned over proposals, but rather a cold-blooded judgement as we considered what was possible. We had to be careful now. This was reality, not castles in the air.

I caught a plane home. I resumed work in Canberra and re-joined the drinking group at the Civic Hotel. The group was still quite strong but there were signs of erosion, if not decay. Some of the blokes had steady girl-friends. Some even had wives. These relationships necessitated many early departures and several non-attendances for those who had allowed their lives to become so complicated.

This was bad enough, but the increased numbers of husbands and affianced men caused a shift in our topics of conversation. The price of land, the honesty of builders, the quality of furniture, the service at restaurants, the burdens of in-laws or prospective in-laws and even the prospect of babies were often discussed. My efforts to introduce Canning Stock Route talk were usually unsuccessful.

When Chud returned to Canberra we found ourselves splintering off from the main group in order to have our own choice of topic of conversation. Too often we were summoned back to the main group to contest the point that we were not getting any younger and that many of the best girls were no longer available. The others took us to task for allowing ourselves to devote our time, energy and resources to an undertaking that was unlikely to alter our marital status. My wardrobe, especially my more formal attire, came in for a good deal of criticism. The criticism was justified. I had occasion to wear my (one and only) suit to two functions. It was ill-fitting enough to be uncomfortable, but I wore the suit so rarely I could not justify the expense of buying a new one.

I wore it first to a cocktail party conducted by the local surveyors. In previous years I had scorned this function but this year I went. I wanted to

meet Mr H.A. Johnson.

Although Mr Johnson does not consider himself to be in the same class as the Australian explorers, many surveyors of my own vintage regard him with the same reverence we reserve for the early explorer-surveyors.

Late in 1962, a dry year, Mr Johnson drove an International (one ton) truck from Well 35, generally north along the Canning Stock Route, to Halls Creek. Well 35 lies about half way between Marble Bar and Alice Springs - approximately 600 miles from each. To reach this well from either town one travels in an easterly (from Marble Bar), or westerly (from Alice Springs), direction. There are graded tracks. The sandridges run in a similar direction so one is able to travel between, rather than across them.

When Mr Johnson reached Halls Creek he had proved conclusively that the Great Sandy Desert could also be traversed in a south to north direction (i.e. across the sandridges) by motor vehicle. The route he followed was subsequently used by all vehicular travellers.

Mr Johnson had travelled alone. His food requirements consisted mainly of tinned fish and cracker biscuits. Not without reason, he is classified as a "character." So much so that a local urban surveyor said to me, "He's mad, you know."

This made me all the keener to bear the embarrassment and discomfort of my suit of clothes in order to meet Mr Johnson.

I succeeded. I was introduced to Mr Johnson and shook his hand. But our acquaintance progressed no further. Cocktail parties are better for renewing old acquaintances rather than establishing new ones. I blame the widespread presence of formal attire for a corresponding amount of formal behaviour. The conversations, like dress, tend to be superficial and I didn't have a chance with Mr Johnson.

He was a celebrity at this gathering and the demands on his company made by the office bearers, and the wives of office bearers, of the surveyors' organisation, took precedence over my own. I was soon swept aside in the face of professional authority and matronly charm. I returned to the company of surveyors of my own age.

The other time I forced myself into the suit that summer was to fill the role of Rotary guest speaker.

Although my job was in Canberra, I lived with my parents in Queanbeyan (10 miles distant). My father was a Queanbeyan Rotarian. He knew of my lack of ability to speak publicly, so it was certainly not his idea that I address the local Rotarians on my work in the desert. When he saw me arrayed in my ill-fitting suit, he quietly suggested that formal attire was not compulsory for the guest speaker. Alas, it was too late to change.

Rotarians do good work in the community, but their weekly dinners are social occasions at which they devote their energies to having a good time. They do not like their speakers to talk for too long - especially those

with my standard of oratory.

I stood before the worthy citizens trying to be brief and, at the same time, give them some idea of what life was like in the Great Sandy Desert. I failed. As I spoke I watched the waitresses clear away the sweets plates and serve coffee. I noticed several members glancing anxiously towards the bar. No one was rude. Patiently, they heard me out - laughing rather loudly at the obvious jokes and not always responding to the less obvious ones. I felt they thanked me a little too profusely. The Rotarians seemed reluctant to believe that I could possibly choose to return to the desert for a long, unpaid holiday instead of pursuing a career in the Commonwealth Public Service.

Back home I overheard my Dad say "not much good" to my mother's inquiry on my performance. I hung the objectionable suit in the back of the wardrobe, thankful that I would not be wearing it for many months. At least the young marrieds accepted me in open-necked shirts.

A newly married man's wife usually believes her husband's single friends should marry. Consequently, I experienced dinner parties for four, late nights, theatre groups, parties and girls who told me, "That Canning Stock Route trip sounds quite interesting" - certainly more interesting than they found my company.

I day-dreamed about the desert. Out there the evening entertainment is the same each night - the sky. The brilliant, all-encompassing heavens are a constant source of wonder. In town the stars are still visible, but never in the same numbers or with the same magnitude when viewed between buildings or through street lighting and car windscreens.

I worried about my sleeping hours. I struggled to leave bed in time to reach the office before 8.30 a.m. A far cry from flying camps in the desert where I savoured ten minutes or so each morning, lying awake in my swag waiting for the dawn.

In town I drank tea from china cups, with matching saucers perched on my nervous knee. Yes, milk and sugar, please. This drink gave me less satisfaction than the scalding, unsweetened, black brew sipped from a misshapen plastic mug in the shade of a Land-Rover.

The comparisons were endless and, to city life, unfavourable. I broke with the social scene and devoted more time to the trip. There was plenty to do.

Chud was shopping around for a new Land-Rover. He is not a person who spends money without giving it a great deal of thought. He patrolled the local car-yards looking for the right vehicle at the right price.

He found it and began work on the modifications he regarded as essential if this Land-Rover was to travel the length of the Canning Stock Route. He installed extra fuel tanks and a water tank. Fully laden the Rover would carry 80 gallons of petrol and 20 gallons of water. As the vehicle would be loaded beyond its design capacity, Chud decided to replace the standard rear springs

with a heavier duty type.

One week night we carried out this operation in a friend's double garage. We had the usual trouble lining up bolts with bolt holes, but the job was soon finished. We proudly enjoyed a cup of coffee before attempting to leave the garage. So, it was rather late in the evening when we discovered that the larger springs had so raised the rear of the Land-Rover that it could no longer pass beneath the rolled-up garage door. We let the tyres down as far as we dared and loaded the back of the vehicle with some heavy equipment lying around in the garage. Then, with half an inch between the roof of the Land-Rover and the top of the garage doorway, we escaped to our friend's driveway.

As we pumped the tyres up again, I said to Chud, "This sort of thing makes Halls Creek seem a long way off."

The distance to Halls Creek had not altered. It was my confidence in our ability to reach that town via Wiluna and the Canning Stock Route that was in doubt.

My main duty at this time was to gather any information on the stock route that could possibly help us on our expedition. An integral part of this job was reading. Reading, I have always found easy.

I began my research by re-reading *The Beckoning West*. Next, I read a copy of *Spinifex and Sand* - David Carnegie's account of his journey across the Great Sandy Desert in the 1890s. Other original source material followed.

Forrest's report of his 1872-73 desert journey, Warburton's expedition, the travels of Francis and Augustus Gregory, Gosse - the man who named Ayers Rock, Stuart, Sturt and several others. Reading these first-hand accounts was, for me, discovering the true nature of Australian explorations for the first time.

I have always enjoyed Australian history, especially the part played by the explorers. Mark Twain's statement says it all.

"Australian history is almost always picturesque; indeed, it is so curious and strange, that it is itself the chiefest novelty the country has to offer, and so it pushes the other novelties into second or third place. It does not read like history, but like the most beautiful lies. And all of a fresh new sort, no mouldy old stale ones. It is full of surprises, and adventures, and incongruities, and contradictions, and incredibilities; but they are all true, they all happened."

Mark Twain, a tourist in Australia in the 1890s would only have been aware of the better known chapters of this history. I wonder what further superlatives he would have called upon had he made a more comprehensive study of the subject.

The very characteristics that Mark Twain enumerates made Australian history one of the more popular subjects I had thrust upon me in my primary school years. Only a really fascinating topic could have survived the unattractive manner in which it was presented to me as a young child.

Our school history text-books were grey. The pages were grey, the print was a darker shade of grey, while the illustrations comprised various degrees of greyness. Nevertheless, the stories contained in these books appealed to me a good deal more than the works of fiction I was asked to study.

The portraits of the explorers in my history text-books were usually of old men, sitting stiffly in suits with high white collars, staring seriously out of the grey pages. I stared back at these pictures trying to place the men in the thrilling adventures connected with their lives. I tried bending the page or studying the portrait in bright sunlight. I wanted to bring some expression to the face. Some life to the man. I wanted to know more. What was he really like?

Later on, as a high school student on an excursion to Parliament House, I chanced upon Ivor Hele's painting of *Sturt's Reluctant Decision to Return*. It was hanging in a lonely corridor of that building.

The visual impact of this picture brought me to a stand-still. Classmates pushed into me as I stood staring at the work of art. The bones of the central horse protruding far enough to provide the rider with a hand rest, the haggard weary men and other emaciated horses surrounding the figure of Sturt - heroic Sturt - concerned but calm, gazing at the indistinct horizon, forced to make the decision, reluctantly, to return.

A couple of years later, in Melbourne, I saw Longstaff's painting of Burke, Wills and King arriving back at the deserted depot at Cooper Creek. The overwhelming aura of exhaustion, disappointment and hopelessness surrounding the figures of Burke, Wills and King subdued me for the remainder of that day.

These two paintings are awe-inspiring portraits of Australian exploration, well suited to provide young Australians with an introduction to their country's history of inland exploration. I am assured that teaching methods and materials have improved since I was at school.

These days there are also many books on Australian scenery and the explorers associated with that scenery. Unfortunately most of the photographers who produce these books tend to concentrate more on their own expeditions and twentieth century complications of travel rather than re-create the expeditions of the early explorers.

Modern historians also annoy me. Although, as Mark Twain says, the story is unique, many historians feel obliged to essay an original, learned comment or draw a new conclusion in their work, instead of concentrating their efforts into accurately and effectively re-telling the story. They compare Australian exploration with the exploration of other countries. They attempt to place material values on the achievements of the explorers and rank them in order of importance. Such quantifiable aspects as distance travelled, good pastures and water found and the numbers of men and beasts lost are given

very close attention. Sadly, the men and their natures and aspirations are generally neglected.

For this reason, I prefer to read books written by the explorers themselves. The original source must be the most authentic. In view of the increasing number of facsimile editions of these books now available, I suspect I am not alone in this preference. Through these volumes, produced by the Libraries Board of South Australia, I have travelled extensively throughout Australia with the early explorers, without leaving my reading chair. As well as exploring the new country, the reader comes to know the author. Even those accounts that are official reports break down on occasions and, through the stiff formal style, the reader glimpses real men and scenes of real life. Following the diary of events, often mundane, I form my own opinion of the different men in the exploring party and, as in real life, my opinions change in the wake of events of travel.

Following the routes of the explorers through settled areas is interesting. However, in the desert where changes are few, the scenes recorded by the desert explorers are often the same today as they were when first recorded. As the landscape is unchanged one feels closer to the original expedition. I don't call this studying or discovering. It is more like experiencing Australian history.

And, because Chud, Noel and myself have experienced Australian history in this manner, we know we have little in common with the explorers. There was always one essential difference between their travels and our own. We had maps - good accurate ones. At all times on our journey, we knew - within a few miles - our position on a map. The map was our security. We were on the map. Also on the map were features we had seen and features we could expect to see. We were not venturing into the unknown. We were merely following a sequence of features described on a map.

Maps have always attracted me. I have wasted a good deal of time poring over them. Even maps of country that is of no particular interest to me hold my attention. At a glance my eyes can cover hundreds or thousands of miles, my imagination filling in whatever gaps I choose. Maps of country I have travelled hold me fast as I recall camp sites, hotels and post offices, fellow travellers, flat tyres, wild-life, washouts, water-holes and a myriad of other incidents.

So I worked on the maps of the Canning Stock Route. We could not afford the aerial photographs that made our survey work so easy. Many of those summer evenings I sat on our lounge room floor familiarising myself with our proposed route and adding any extra information I was able to glean from books.

I like the Australian 1:250,000 series of maps on which four miles is represented by one inch. It is a good travelling scale. A larger scale involves too many maps while a smaller scale does not show enough

detail. As I have used this scale map series often, I like to think have a feel for the "one to two-fifty thou's" – produced by the Commonwealth Government's National Mapping Division.

Big sandridges are shown individually. The shapes of small creeks and watercourses are clearly defined. The maps are comprehensive and accurate. I am usually confident of the information shown on the map. It is the fixing of my own position on the map that causes me concern.

As an alternative method of fixing our position, Chud and I decided to train ourselves in practical astronomy. Astronomy is an important part of a surveyor's training and while Chud and I were quite sound on the theory, our practical experience was limited.

We organised the equipment and chose a method (Rimington's) that would give us latitude and longitude from the one set of readings. We used the theodolite and timing gear quite confidently, but we needed practice. Too often we were forced to skip tea - after several beers at the Civic - and then rush our star observations. Consequently, our movements lacked the fine touch required for accurate astronomy. My parents were a little concerned when our calculations placed their Queanbeyan front lawn somewhere east (off-shore) of Batemans Bay, eighty miles away. We needed practice.

I could spare only one week-end at the coast with my family in the new year. I needed all my annual (paid) leave. We required three months for the trip so, for a good deal of that time, I would be on leave without pay.

Chud and I had arrived at the figure of three months (13 weeks) in this manner. Three weeks to organise fuel dumps and travel to Wiluna, the southern extremity of the Canning Stock Route. Four weeks to drive along the route to Halls Creek, the northern extremity. One week to return to Canberra, giving a total of eight weeks. To this we added a five week allowance for unscheduled delays which extended the total to 13 weeks or three calendar months.

The most common cause of trouble in official and private expeditions is lack of time. I have seen and heard of many promising beginnings ending in disarray and ill-feeling because one or more of a party is obliged to get home by a certain date. As the certain date approaches strain develops to a rush which can reach panic proportions. To do a trip well there must be no worries about time. There must be no target dates. Hence our decision to allow ourselves three months.

We set our departure date at 1 June. As that day drew nearer our preparations became more urgent. There was still plenty to do. Fortunately, Chud is a good organiser. He made lists. Chud's mother once told me that he has liked making lists ever since he was a little boy. We shared the lists and went to work.

Buckets, rope, blankets, tarpaulins, jerry cans, maps, vehicle spare parts and a host of other necessities had to be purchased. Purchased with

our own money and involving a good deal of footslogging from shop to shop. Impatience and weariness contested with the need to buy at the cheapest price.

As 1 June approached, these activities competed for our spare time with an increasing number of social activities - farewell drinks and "must have you round before you go."

To further complicate matters, my football team, after a dramatic loss of form in the second half of 1967, was showing good form in 1968. I was checking over my maps, at home on the patio, when they played St George, the premiers.

Once again it was close. St George led early. I found it easy to concentrate on my maps during the first half as St George, in a masterful manner, ran to a 13 points to 4 lead. The game looked to be over. Then things began to happen. Our old friend Les Hanigan scored a try. (13-7). Two other of our men kicked field goals. (13-11). Then our not-all-that-reliable fullback, Bob Batty, kicked a penalty goal which made the score 13 all. But Langlands was still with the Saints. He fired a pass out to his field goal expert, who made no mistake. Saints were in front again. (15-13).

With one minute to go, in a strange twist of *deja vu*, we received a penalty within kicking range. I waited, glaring malevolently at the innocent transistor radio, for the result of the kick. A trickle of static, a roar, the kick was good. It was only a draw but I raised my arms in a victory salute. In so doing maps and papers became airborne, and scattered. No doubt about it this year - I was happy with the result.

I had not planned on a visit to Sydney before going bush. However, our team had again come close to toppling the might of St George and young Stan was saying things like, "This could be the year." I decided I would drive down and see a game before leaving.

This time it was Wests, playing at Lidcombe Oval, a team Stan and I believed would be beaten by our men. As Lidcombe is on the western side of Sydney, it is a little less than 200 miles from our home.

The game was a tragedy. Wests won by nine points to five and, although the score was close, Wests never looked like losing. Everything our men tried fell apart. It was an agonising match to watch. Agonising.

Stan and I, dejectedly, walked slowly back to our car with the unenviable prospect of a 200 mile, conversationless drive back home to Queanbeyan. An elderly gentleman, wearing maroon and white identification, turned to us and said:

"Would you believe it? I drove all the way from Manly to see this."

Stan and I were not sympathetic.

I felt sorry for Stan. He looked to be in for a painful season of football. I took a deep breath. This time was not consigning myself to the Great

Sandy Desert. I was escaping to it.



[Laundry and bathroom at our 1967 base camp Glen-Ayle](#)

CHAPTER 3

South-East to Centre

On Saturday the first of June 1968, I woke about five o'clock. Chud had slept at our place in Queanbeyan. We bustled around and woke my mother who cooked us some sausages. "You'll need something solid if you're going to be travelling all day," she said. My parents have made many farewells in their time. There was no scene. Chud and I were driving through the streets of Canberra before seven o'clock. At last, we were under way.

My reading of the previous months, concentrating on accounts of the expeditions of others, had led me to believe that preparation and organisation are the most important part of any expedition. This may be true when large groups of people and vehicles are involved. However, a couple of blokes setting out in a Land-Rover, for only three months, can easily rectify bad or incomplete arrangements after they have started. I would never delay a start because I was not quite ready.

Chud and I went over the several loose ends and things we had left undone as we broke out of the city environs onto the Yass plains. We did not allow these forgotten matters to inhibit our pleasure in being on the road. We laughed and joked and acted up like young boys going fishing. When the banter was at its highest, the cabin of the Land-Rover resounded with vigorous laughter. Then the good humour over-flowed into the ridiculous and obscene and we both fell silent, each with our own thoughts.

"Well, this is it. We're away. Let's hope it goes OK."

I mean, really, it was no holiday jaunt. No one has driven this stock route before. Drive the stock route? We've got to get to it first. It's a long way from here to the west. Over to South Australia, up to Alice Springs and on to the top of the stock route near Halls Creek. That's a trip and a half in itself. Then we have to take petrol in to a couple of points on the stock route. And we've got to make those fuel dump trips on our own. Just one vehicle. That's dangerous in the desert: travelling alone. We don't join up with Noel, and his vehicle, until we get down to Meekatharra. It's only then do we drive out to Wiluna and begin our trip up the Canning. Gee, I wish it wasn't still raining over there. Of all the bloody years to have a late wet in the west. Well, we can only carry on regardless and see how far we get. What if we don't even get to the stock route? We'd never live that down. I wish I hadn't told so many people we were going to be the first to drive it. If it is too wet, I suppose we could stay on the bitumen and go on to Perth. Maybe Albany, I've never been there.

Suddenly I said out loud, "What's that?"

"What?"

"That car."

"What car?"

I looked back. "Oh, it's just a car up a tree." A car had failed to take the last corner and mounted the trunk of a fallen tree.

"It's OK, Chud. There's nobody there. Must've happened a while ago."

Chud drove on. I looked around at the countryside and made a mental note of the spot. I would look at it on the way back home. How would I feel then, compared to how I feel now?

It was hard for me to take an interest in the country towns of the southern slopes, the Riverina and the western plains of New South Wales. My thoughts were already in the west. After lunch at Narrandera I drove across the Hay plains. I felt drowsy after the midday meal and the road was straight, level and sleep-inducing. Fortunately, a high wind blew up. I had to stay wide awake to keep the Land-Rover on the road.

Chud's Dad was bank managing at Wentworth - where the Darling River flows into the Murray. We aimed to spend our first night in that town. The first tank of petrol emptied. Chud showed me which lever to turn to put us on the big back tank. Immediately there was trouble. The engine began to cough and splutter. It was starving for fuel. Chud persevered in the hope that the trouble was only temporary. It wasn't. Eventually he decided that we needed breathers on the newly installed petrol tanks. We transferred petrol to the tank that came with the Land-Rover and pressed on - smoothly.

Chud's parents were overjoyed to see him. I went to bed early, between clean, crisp sheets - hardly roughing it.

The next night was to be no rougher. Again, we began the day with another maternally-prepared, solid breakfast. We stopped at Crystal Brook in South Australia and quickly devoured a cold chicken supplied by Chud's Mum. This town is at a point named by Edward John Eyre on his journey north from Adelaide. Only after his progress north was halted by salt lakes did he head west for Albany and Western Australia. There is a monument to Eyre in Crystal Brook.

We drove north through Port Augusta and beyond. Shortly after five o'clock we successfully negotiated the security post that protects Woomera from tourists. A couple of former members of our Civic drinking school had recently started their married life in Woomera. So once again our swags remained unbroken in the Land-Rover as we slept on fold-away beds, between clean sheets.

In the morning our friends and their wives rushed off to work. Chud and I strolled around town and purchased some fresh supplies. Chud fitted breathers to the auxiliary petrol tanks and we left for Kingoonya. From Kingoonya our way lay north to Coober Pedy. We celebrated our arrival in the opal village with several cold stubbies. Then we drove out of town and turned off the road to make camp in a dry watercourse.

Experienced campers are unanimous in the belief that one should make camp before dark. This is true. However, if one is obliged - for whatever reason

- to make camp in the dark, I believe it can be more agreeably done if one's constitution is fortified with the contents of several stubbies of cold beer. In this condition one unloads the vehicle very quickly. The stretcher may prove a little troublesome to assemble. Indeed, I have known stretchers to be so unco-operative in these circumstances that they have been dismissed as unnecessary. The swag presents no such problems. Once unrolled, its interior is irresistible. Considerations of correct positioning and orderly arrangement before entry, meticulously considered and carried out when sober, are totally neglected by even the slightly inebriated.

Of course, the sun does seem to rise early the next morning. The urgent need to expend fluid from the body is closely followed by an equally demanding need to take fluid into the body.

Our camp on the outskirts of Coober Pedy was our first real camp of the trip.

"Pretty good spot you chose," I told Chud as I began my first cup of coffee. I looked up the watercourse and reviewed the various articles of our luggage scattered around our randomly selected camp site. "Come on, old son. Up you get. Halls Creek is a long way up from here."

That day we entered Australia's Red Centre. Country which I first came to know at slide evenings conducted by surveyors older than myself and through the paintings of Albert Namatjira. But now, having travelled through it and read *Australia Twice Traversed* a couple of times, I associate the Red Centre with Ernest Giles.

I realise that this land means more to countless aborigines than it could ever mean to Giles, myself or any white man. But I do have some understanding of the relationship between the land and the black man, but because I am white I cannot experience it. However, as a white man, not only was I able to appreciate Giles' reaction to the land, I was also able to experience it.

For a few years now, Giles has received so much publicity as Australia's most neglected explorer, he can no longer be classed as neglected. The wide distribution of his own writings and a couple of new biographies have made him one of the more talked about explorers in recent years. He deserves the recognition, however belated.

Giles was sixteen when he came to Australia. He lived and explored in the Murray-Darling region of western New South Wales. While travelling in this area he found equipment abandoned by Sturt on his Simpson Desert expedition. Geographically, he was close to the Burke and Wills expedition and was a member of a Leichhardt search party. He became infected with exploration.

Little wonder then that Giles was determined to participate in the last great chapter of Australian exploration: connecting the settled areas of Western

Australia to the Overland Telegraph Line - through the interior of the continent.

Most historians, and even Giles himself, rate his successful east-to-west then west-to-east crossings with camels his greatest achievement. I claim his unsuccessful attempts to reach the west from central Australia with horses superior. There is evidence of his extraordinary talent for exploring. The accounts of these journeys certainly make better reading.

When Giles used horses, the distance travelled each day was less than the daily distance he travelled with camels on later journeys. At the slower speed, Giles had more time to observe the country. Each evening, with less country to report on, his writing was more detailed. Also, because he used horses, he was forced to search for water more often. These searches were often exciting and led him to many interesting places.

Many of the places Giles visited are tourist attractions today. In their efforts to attract tourists to this area of Australia, I believe tourist promoters should quote Giles on their brochures. His descriptions of the country are more accurate and more readable than the twentieth century tourist blurb that the promoters use at present.

But it's not just Giles' style of writing that appeals to me. I find his style of exploring equally attractive. On these early trips it was modest and low-key. His parties were small. Only three or four men, with a dozen or so horses, they were able to amble their way through the land - unlike the large scale expeditions that set out to blaze a trail across the continent.

At times Giles appears illogical. He often bowed to the wishes of his men rather than demand military-like subservience. On several journeys he even took a little dog. His illogical behaviour shows just how flexible he was as an explorer. And because he was flexible he was prepared to reconsider decisions previously made. He was prepared to adjust his targets as the land and the conditions demanded, rather than rigidly pitting himself against them.

Anyone who follows Giles' trails today finds it easy to admire his ability to travel this country as he did over one hundred years ago. Also, as this country is so magnificent, it is easy to accept Giles' word that he thoroughly enjoyed himself while exploring. But not all the time.

Giles' account of his reaching one of his furthest points west is a good example of the "incredibilities" of Australian history that so impressed Mark Twain.

Giles' main party was camped at the western end of the Rawlinson Range. It was late summer in 1874 and the waterholes were drying up. He decided to make an effort, with his man Gibson, to reach the west from this point. They filled their kegs and, with only four horses, they headed into the unknown.

The two men talked of Burke and Wills and their tragedy. They found no water but saw ahead, low on the horizon, the outline of the Alfred and Marie Range. This range held the promise of water. They turned loose two of their

horses in the belief that the beasts would follow their tracks back to the base camp. They hung two kegs of water in a tree and pressed on. Gibson's horse died. Their water ran out. Giles looked longingly at the now unattainable Alfred and Marie Range and knew he must retreat.

He gave Gibson his horse and instructed him to follow the tracks back to base camp and bring relief. He would follow Gibson in that direction, on foot.

Giles reached the kegs in the tree. Gibson had been there and taken one. Giles continued walking east, now encumbered with a heavy keg of water. He weakened. He had fainting spells, but he noticed that the two horses they had turned loose had left the outward track and headed south. He also noticed Gibson's tracks following those of the straying horses. He believed Gibson would realise his error and rejoin the outward track. Gibson never did.

Giles struggled on. He ate a young wallaby - live. He reached the base camp to find that Gibson had not. After a short rest and in spite of his weakened condition, he was off again in search of the missing man. He never found him.

Giles endured these hardships, unaware that another explorer, Warburton, had already reached Western Australia, having crossed the desert further north. He was also unaware that John Forrest was now entering the desert on the western side and beginning a successful crossing to the east.

Giles began the melancholy journey back east to the Overland Telegraph Line. He had failed to reach the west and he poignantly reported in his diary, "One of our small party had gone from us."

Ah, Giles. It's a pity the main road to Alice Springs does not pass beside Chamber's Pillar, an ancient sandstone outcrop and Giles' starting point on these journeys. It would make an ideal site for a monument to Ernest Giles.

As it was, on this occasion, Chud and I, like most travellers, sped on to the Alice, marvelling at the wonder of the Red Centre as it flashed by, but anticipating the comforts and excitement of town.

In Alice Springs we slept under cover but not between clean sheets. Chud's survey camp of the previous year, near Marble Bar, was close to Yarrie station. Sue, from Yarrie, was now working in Alice Springs. She shared a flat with Rosalie. Chud and I unrolled our swags on the porch attached to the flat.

We socialised a little in the Alice.

Although Chud and I were quite spartan in the way we limited ourselves to only essential camping gear and a small supply of very functional garments, we did allow ourselves the luxury of a "good clobber" box.

This box contained our sets of good clothes. Each set comprised a pair of lace-up shoes, a pair of socks, a pair of long trousers and a shirt, usually described as decent. These articles were kept neatly folded in the good clobber box and covered with a towel or sheet of plastic. The box was stowed in a safe, dust-free corner of the Land-Rover.

On our arrival in Alice Springs, Chud's command was, "Break out the good clobber."

We liked to wear our good clobber for a few hours before any outing to allow our body heat to make the folds in these clothes less obvious. This manoeuvre was only partially successful in Alice Springs. Actually, the entire evening of dancing with Sue and Rosalie can be adequately described in the same terms.

Single respectable white girls in Alice Springs were rare. Great were the demands made by permanent male residents upon Sue and Rosalie. Chud and I were outnumbered and outweighed. The locals categorised us as blow-ins from the south. I pointed out to Chud, "At least we aired the good clobber."

I like Alice Springs, but I am never completely relaxed there because of the racial tension. Racial tension is more pronounced in towns frequented by tourists. Their presence and the money they bring widens the gap between the haves and the have-nots. In the streets of Alice I guiltily drop my eyes before groups of surly, resentful aborigines and I cross the street to avoid parties of pale-skinned, well-padded tourists on a souvenir hunt.

I am too appreciative of my own standard of living to whole-heartedly embrace the aboriginal cause. I would strongly resist any claim on my quarter acre block in suburbia.

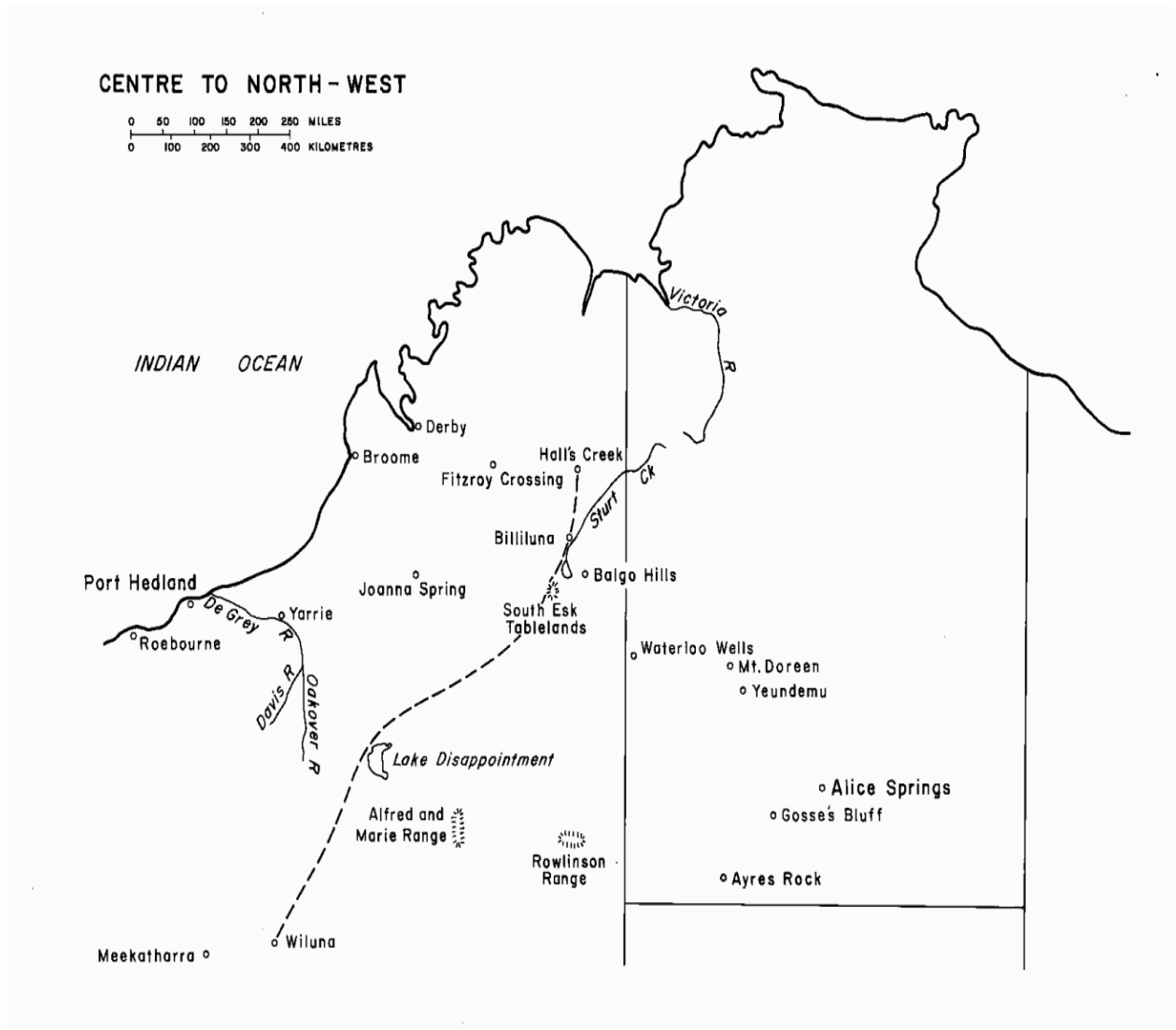
While I agree that aborigines were treated abominably by my ancestors, I refuse to be held responsible for that treatment. I have fond memories of aborigines I have met and camped beside on lonely roads in Australia. Away from the towns, I believed the conversations and drinks I shared with these people were conducted with all participants on an equal footing. We rarely discussed racial problems. We talked about the land, its history, its character and its wonder.

I am now informed, by the racially-liberated, that I was being patronising, if not indeed racist, and that I took advantage of the aborigine and his knowledge.

Before leaving Alice Springs we loaded our vehicle to its maximum fuel capacity. The extra weight took all the curve out of the so-called heavy duty springs. After a few tentative miles on a rough road it was obvious that our Land-Rover, so loaded, would be in no condition to take the bumping and rough-house driving tactics associated with crossing sandridges. We needed still stronger springs. Chud wired ahead and arranged for us to pick them up at Port Hedland on our way through.

Our plan now was to leave the Alice and drive to Billiluna station, at the top of the stock-route, and take a 44 gallon drum of petrol down to Well 48. This would be fuel dump number three. Fuel dump number two we had already organised at Well 35. Our fuel dump number one, at Well 22, we would make ourselves when we reached Balfour Downs, east of Mt Newman, in Western Australia.

CHAPTER 4



CHAPTER 4

Centre to North-West

Gosse Bluff is only one hundred and fifty miles west south-west of Alice Springs. A survey team, containing some of the Civic Hotel drinkers, was camped there.

Gosse Bluff is a natural, circular sandstone wall, about half a mile thick and up to five hundred feet high. Contained within the wall is an area of land, circular in shape, and about one mile in diameter. This interior must be higher than the surrounding country as a small creek flows from it, having breached the wall on the north-east side. The bluff is a couple of miles south of the McDonnell Range, just beyond Hermannsburg Mission and is yet to be overrun by tourists.

Our friends could see the Bluff from their camp. Chud and I arrived at sundown. The camp cook was not impressed.

"If you blokes want food, you better see some of those gutses in there." He waved his ladle at the mess tent.

"No worries," I said, "We'll be right. We'll fix our own tucker later."

While camp cooks resent extra mouths to feed, they dislike, even more, people who prepare food for themselves in their camp.

"Hang on. Yeah, you're in luck. There's a bit left." As he prepared two extra serves he asked, "You the two blokes gonna drive the Canning Stock Route?"

"That's us," said Chud proudly.

"Well," the cook answered, "I drove me Holden 'ute down that way a couple of years back. The road was okay then."

Chud smiled at the cook but said nothing. He knew better than to have a dispute with a cook - certainly not while resident in his camp. We thanked him for the meals and entered the mess tent.

I was surprised to see, seated there, one of the men from my survey team of the previous year.'

"What are you doing here, Clyde? At the end of last year you swore you'd never go bush again."

Clyde slowly chewed a mouthful of food and swallowed it before answering.

"Ah, you know how it is. By the end of summer in Perth I started to think the desert wasn't such a bad place in winter. The missus was startin' to nag me about money and anyhow, I knew I wouldn't be workin' with you."

Everyone laughed. I did too and then retaliated.

I spoke to Clyde's boss. "Hell, Laurie, you better watch this guy at the end of the year. He gets a bit toey." Everyone laughed again, but not as loudly as they had before. I changed the subject.

"What's your job here Laurie?"

Laurie explained that the Bureau of Mineral Resources (B.M.R.) had asked for a detail survey over the area of the Bluff. He thought they were trying to work out how Gosse Bluff had formed.

"What, don't they know?" I asked.

"Apparently not," said Laurie. Then he asked me, "Listen, seeing as how you're here, I'll get you to help me with the forms. You know, overtime claims, vehicle running sheets and all that. I'm not sure of how many of each they want at Canberra."

"Steady on Lawrence. I'm on leave without pay this year. Remember?"

We left the workers early next morning and drove around Gosse Bluff. I found it as fascinating as Ayres Rock or the Olgas. A B.M.R. geologist was unlucky enough to meet us. Feigning innocence, I asked him how Gosse Bluff came to be there.

"Do you really want to know?" He looked hard at me. He was not going to waste time on me unless I was genuinely interested.

"Sure I do," I said, "I might write a book about it one day."

The geologist explained that there were three theories. The traditional belief was that the Bluff was formed by an extensive layer of salt well below the earth's surface. This salt has the ability to force its way into the overlying strata. The theory is that salt, pushing upwards, has forced layers of earth upwards - on a grand scale - to form the Bluff.

The next explanation is that there was volcanic activity deep down in the earth. There was no explosion of lava, only a re-shaping of the earth's surface where the activity was most concentrated.

The other theory is simply that a meteorite once landed here. The Bluff is only the remains of the meteorite, the rest having eroded away in the millions of years since it struck the earth.

The geologist was very patient with me. I suggested to him, "Seems the only thing we can be sure of is that it was named after Gosse, the explorer."

"Well no," said the geologist. "You check it out. In Giles' book he said he named it after Harry Gosse. William Gosse was the explorer. I think Harry was his brother."

I checked it out. In his journey of 1872 Giles saw and named Gosse Range, which contains the Bluff, after a Mr Harry Gosse. In William Gosse's journal he refers to his brother as Henry. Apparently Henry was well-known in the area for his work on the construction of the Overland Telegraph Line. In the field, in 1873, the Goss brothers: William and Henry, passed well to the west of Gosse Bluff. They never saw it.

I feel sorry for William Gosse, the explorer. He is doomed to mediocrity, dwelling in the enormous shadow cast by Giles. As a

contemporary of Giles, and the two were actually exploring the country at the same time, Gosse is always subjected to a comparison with Giles. Few explorers can bear a comparison with Giles.

In retrospect, it does appear that Gosse should have done better. The South Australian government, enthusiastically, financed and organised his expedition. He was one of the first explorers to be supplied with camels: the ships of the desert that were to revolutionise inland exploration. With these advantages Gosse, after a messy start, travelled north-west of Alice Springs, turned south into country explored by Giles the previous year and reached Ayres Rock. He then pushed west, one hundred miles into Western Australia, before lack of water forced him to bring his party back to the Overland Telegraph Line.

Gosse's advantages worked against him. The government involvement in his expedition ensured that he was supplied with a comprehensive set of instructions. These instructions complicated his decision-making and hamstrung his movements. Although supplied with camels, Gosse had no understanding of their behaviour or appreciation of their capabilities. The camels were as much use to Gosse as a Land-Rover would be to a person who could not drive a car. His fault was that he made little effort to learn how to use his camels. He persevered with horses on his trail-blazing forays and only used the camels for carrying supplies.

In so doing, Gosse joins a long list of surveyors who have ignored new, unfamiliar technology available to them, and clung to the security of familiar, traditional methods. This tendency is not confined to the surveying profession.

Perhaps Gosse's greatest short-coming was his meagre, unembellished literary output. He never gave himself a chance with posterity. The published account of his journey contains no more than a brief, concise report of where he went and what he saw. This brevity has given researchers very little material to work with. The very professionalism of his writing is responsible for its relative neglect.

On his journey Gosse accurately fixed, for latitude and longitude, many points merely visited and named by Giles. Gosse successfully crossed Lake Amadeus, something Giles had been unable to do. He became the first white man to visit and climb Ayres Rock. Gosse's furthest point west was hardly improved upon by Giles when he explored the same area two months later. It was Gosse's furthest point west that Forrest, coming from the west, was heading for when he found Giles' tracks. And it was Gosse's map that provided Forrest with a comparatively easy route to the Overland Telegraph Line.

Poor old Gosse. In Adelaide, at the victory banquet held to celebrate Forrest's successful crossing, Gosse was asked to speak. The text of his speech indicates that he was still trying to justify, to a doubting government and public, decisions he made in the field in 1873. Sadder still, his health failed and he died nine years later at the age of 39.

Our route from Gosse Bluff to Billiluna and the top of the Canning Stock Route lay north through the Tanami Desert. The Tanami is sandy and scrubby but without the relentless lines of parallel sandridges which give the Great Sandy Desert its unique character. The track was in reasonable condition and rarely used, so we made good progress.

Beyond Yuendumu we came to Mt Doreen station but there was no sign of life there. We passed a deserted truck, bogged, but so long abandoned that the mud had hardened around the captive vehicle.

"We're really on our own now," said Chud.

A few miles later we met three men, in two vehicles, travelling from the nearby Chilla Well south to Alice Springs. They warned us of flooding further north and advised us to travel to Billiluna via Balgo Hills Mission. We considered their advice. The missionaries of Balgo did not like tourists. They had a reputation for refusing travellers passage through their reserve. Their attitude was caused by the bad behaviour of previous visitors.

We drove on and discussed the relative terrors associated with the wrath of the Almighty's emissaries on earth and the inconvenience caused by the oversupply of His bounteous gifts to earth. (i.e. rain).

Then, out of the blue, a small plane flew low overhead. The noise of its engines ended our discussion. We stopped. The plane wheeled, swung back over us and a piece of white paper fluttered down.

It was a message. "Return to Chilla, we'll meet you there."

Puzzled, we turned around and headed back to Chilla Well airstrip - it was close to the main track. We had not gone far when the plane buzzed us again. Again we were comprehensively frightened out of our wits. Another message floated down.

This one read, "Sorry, we thought you were someone else. Carry on."

Our curiosity demanded that we continue back to the airstrip. We found waiting there the two vehicles we had passed earlier in the day. The plane landed. Its occupants resolved the case of mistaken identity. They had thought we were the men in the two vehicles. We carried on - to Balgo Hills Mission.

This mission, in common with many other places in remote areas, had no signposts. The traveller who wishes to pass through quickly and unobtrusively receives no help. A network of roads seemed designed to draw us to the main building which, in view of the reputation of these missionaries, Chud and I were anxious to avoid. A small aboriginal boy saved us.

"Which way Billiluna?" I asked, smiling as widely as I could.

He pointed down the road we were on, in the direction we were heading. He looked at us quizzically. Why should white fellas stop to ask the way when

they were already on the right road travelling in the right direction?

With Balgo Hills safely behind us, we were now free to worry, exclusively, about the large amounts of water on and beside the road. We had to cross Sturt Creek to reach Billiluna.

Sturt Creek is an enigma of a water-course. Its source is in the same country that gives rise to the Ord and the Victoria, two of the largest rivers of the Kimberley area. These two rivers flow generally north to the sea. Sturt Creek flows south - into the desert.

Augustus Gregory explored this creek when he was leading the North Australian Expedition in 1856. This trek of Gregory's, from the Kimberleys to the Queensland coast, is one of the greatest feats of Australian exploration.

In a foreword to Wendy Birman's biography of Augustus Gregory, G.C. Bolton refers to Gregory as a "Bradman among explorers." It's a good comparison. Gregory came to Western Australia from England when he was ten years old. He held none of the English preconceptions about leading overland expeditions that handicapped many explorers of that era. Just as Bradman learned his cricket isolated from traditional coaching methods, Gregory formed his ideas on travelling in the Australian bush while growing up on a pioneer farm in the Swan River colony.

In terms of miles traversed, Gregory was certainly a prolific explorer. His several journeys in Western Australia, followed by his mammoth trek with the North Australian Expedition, and then a journey nearly half way back across Australia in search of Leichhardt, bear comparison with Bradman's tally of runs.

He came to Sturt Creek in the early stages of the North Australian Expedition. The declared purpose of this expedition was to investigate the interior and explore northern Australia - a tall order in 1855. His party of 18 men with provisions for 18 months travelled under sail up the Victoria River into the East Kimberleys. They established a depot in the vicinity of today's Timber Creek and from here Gregory sought to investigate the interior.

I like the sequence of events that took place there on New Year's Day 1856. Gregory's advance party were in the act of leaving the depot with, I imagine, some awareness that the departure was a significant historical event. The captain of the schooner that had bought Gregory's party to this point was moved to fire a gun to mark the occasion.

The team of horses took fright and galloped into the bush in a variety of directions. The thick scrub effectively removed saddle bags and saddles from the backs of the horses. Equipment was scattered over a distance of two miles. For the next two days the men were occupied in recovering and repairing the equipment. They made a new start on 3 January and no doubt the captain of the schooner received strict instructions to allow the occasion to pass in silence.

Finally underway, Gregory followed the Victoria River to its source and then ventured south to investigate the interior. Twice the desert turned him back. Then he found and named Sturt Creek, flowing south into the interior.

Hopefully, Gregory followed its course. He found only a series of water-holes in the bed of the creek, but he saw evidence of greater flows which had occurred in previous years. (Indeed, Chud and I, travelling west across the same Sturt Creek, forded several channels of fast-flowing, coffee coloured water up to four feet deep).

But Gregory was disappointed in his Sturt Creek. He traced it to a large salt lake. He thoroughly searched the edges of this lake for an outlet but found only "long straight ridges of fiery-red drifting sand." He conjectured on whether these ridges were part of the same desert (the Simpson) penetrated by Sturt in 1845.

Gregory was writing in 1856. Before Alice Springs, before the Overland Telegraph Line linked Adelaide and Darwin, seventeen years before Giles and Gosse, even before Burke and Wills. In 1856, Gregory, on the northern edge of what he called "the Great Australian Desert" could only relate his position to Sturt's exploration as far away as the corner of Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia. The interior was a great unknown.

I'm not surprised that Gregory chose to abandon this investigation and concentrated on exploring the north - which he did magnificently. Almost a year later his party reached Brisbane.

As our Land-Rover slid across another wet patch, Chud said, "Old Gregory could've done with some of this water when he was here. He could've sailed his boat down Sturt Creek instead of following a line of water-holes."

The large amount of water caused us some inconvenience. We detoured north to avoid it and then turned south for Billiluna station. Billiluna is to the northern end of the Canning Stock Route as Glen-Ayle is to the southern end. Just as there are no stations north of Glen-Ayle, there are no stations south of Billiluna - just the Great Sandy Desert.

At that time a man named Jerry was the manager of Billiluna. He agreed to sell us a 44 gallon drum of petrol at a fair price. The normally absentee owner of Billiluna happened to be present for the day and I suspect he cramped Jerry's style. Everyone at the station appeared so busy that we felt guilty interrupting the work for something as frivolous as a holiday trip along the Canning Stock Route.

We left Billiluna late in the afternoon, the drum of petrol set squarely in the back of the Land-Rover and our other equipment packed awkwardly around it. Once again, the springs bent to the horizontal, or slightly beyond. Chud drove slowly.

This drum of petrol was a safety valve. By delivering it one hundred miles down the stock-route, we were allowing ourselves a greater margin of error in our petrol consumption estimate for the trip up the stock route,

We resisted the temptation to explore. If we were to drive the stock route

properly, we were not eligible to check out the last few wells on this section until we had seen all the previous ones. We kept to the track. This had to be a simple out and back trip to establish the fuel dump.

The country dried out as the landscape changed from poor cattle country to desert. Carnegie explored this area in the 1890s and he described it in his book *Spinifex and Sand*. We came to the South Esk Tableland - a haphazardly placed jumble of rounded and flat-topped hills. I identified one group as those in a sketch in Carnegie's book. Contained in these hills are a network of canyons and valleys which, in turn, contain water-holes and other historic sites.

Again, Chud assured me, "We'll be back. We'll explore them then."

Miles on a map are easy to contemplate and divide into easy stages. I stood on the edge of the South Esk Tablelands and considered the thousand plus miles of sandridges separating me from Wiluna and the start of the Canning Stock Route. It looked much simpler on the map. If Chud had any doubts about our ability to make it back here via the entire length of the Canning Stock Route, he did not communicate them to me.

We drove into a box canyon on the south-west edge of the hills. We rolled out our drum of petrol and concealed it in a group of saplings. I attached a note explaining the life-preserving nature of this drum of fuel and outlining the dire circumstances that could eventuate if anyone tampered with it.

We enjoyed a desert camp without the drum of petrol dominating the interior of the vehicle, not to mention the springs, and then made good time back to Billiluna.

The owner had moved on to inspect another of his properties. Jerry was more relaxed and inclined to yarn. We drew comfort from the matter-of-fact way Jerry accepted our statement that we would see him again next month - coming from the south, via the stock route.

Generously, he gave us a large piece of prime fillet steak. "Something for tea" he called it. Chud gave no credence to my suggestion that Jerry gave us the meat as a hearty meal in the belief that we were condemned men.

Our destination now was Yarrrie station near Marble Bar: the site of Chud's base camp of the previous year.

We drove north from Billiluna, intersected the Great Northern Highway south-west of Halls Creek and made good mileage to camp short of Fitzroy Crossing. In Derby at midday the following day we treated ourselves to a Chinese meal then drove on to Broome, arriving at dusk. Here we inspected a Japanese cemetery and peered into the Chinese joss-house type buildings so common in the town. We checked out the hotel after tea and listened to a local dance band.

Derby and Broome are contrasting towns. The oriental influences in Broome gave it an exotic flavour while Derby appeared to be a conventional, colonial outpost with a strong public service flavour. Of course, my judgement

is clouded by the fact that I visited Derby at midday in the hard light of day, when tropical towns are at their most dormant. But arriving at Broome in the gathering twilight and beginning my acquaintance of the town with several beers at the hotel, my senses were more receptive to any romantic auras on offer.

To me - a conservative urban dweller - the very characteristics that attracted me to Broome as a tourist, would trouble me as a permanent resident. I can appreciate a new and different life style, but I doubt I could ever adopt one. I am too set in my ways to adopt a permanent change in my way of life or sense of values. While I enjoyed visiting Broome, I would be more at ease living in Derby. I find most towns have two distinct characters: one for transients and one for residents. We left Broome the next morning. It remains for me, as a transient, a wonderful town.

We drove south. We saw ominous, heavy clouds ahead.

"It shouldn't be raining in the Pilbara at this time of year," said Chud.

"You're right," I said, "But it sure as Hell is."

Rain started to fall. The muddy nature of the road and the frequency of puddles of water indicated that this was not the first rain. We hurried on - anxiously. The commodious verandahs of the Yarrie homestead appealed as a more attractive camp site than the soggy roadside.

We left the main road for a station track at Wallal. The brown arid country we had traversed last year was now as green as a golf course. North of Yarrie, we met Leo, the manager of Callawa, a station adjoining Yarrie. Chud knew Leo from last year.

"Aw, I don't know how you'll go Chud." Leo spoke slowly. "I reckon Eel Creek'll be up with this rain."

Leo knew this country. Eel Creek was up. Last year's trickle of water had expanded to a width of a couple of hundred feet and too deep for the Land-Rover to cross. We decided to camp. There were some breaks in the clouds. The water level might drop and, once across, it was only a couple of miles to the Yarrie homestead.

I used petrol to light a fire. Chud and I ate the last of the Billiluna fillet. We sat and watched the water until dark. I concluded that, if anything, Eel Creek was still rising. I eased myself into my damp swag and tried to think of things other than water. I was annoyed to find myself humming a Johnny Cash song *Five Foot High and Rising*. Again, Halls Creek seemed a long way off.

Water in the swag woke me at first light. It was raining again, heavily, but, unaccountably, Eel Creek had narrowed to a width of only fifty feet and was shallow at the crossing.

"C^fmon Chud, let's go," I yelled. I leaped from my swag and began throwing gear into the Land-Rover. Chud joined in. Swags, food, cutlery, boots, bottles, books and maps were loaded in a sequence determined by their proximity to our hands. The job was soon done. Eel Creek was down.

But for how long? When it rose again it would rise quickly, as a wall of water.

We crossed. On the other side, we bogged. Ten frantic minutes later the vehicle was moving again. Chud drove on using all his skill and drawing on all his experience. I hung onto the back of the Land-Rover, hopping down to push whenever the wheels began to spin. The vehicle's rate of forward progress was slow. I found I could keep up at an easy jog, moving in to lay my weight against the rear of the Land-Rover whenever it faltered.

During this performance the back wheels threw mud over me.

In this manner, we slipped and slid the couple of miles to Yarrie station. Despite the early hour, the Yarrie people had heard us coming. By the time Chud pulled up at the front gate, Frank, Mrs Welsh and Langtree were coming down the path to welcome us.

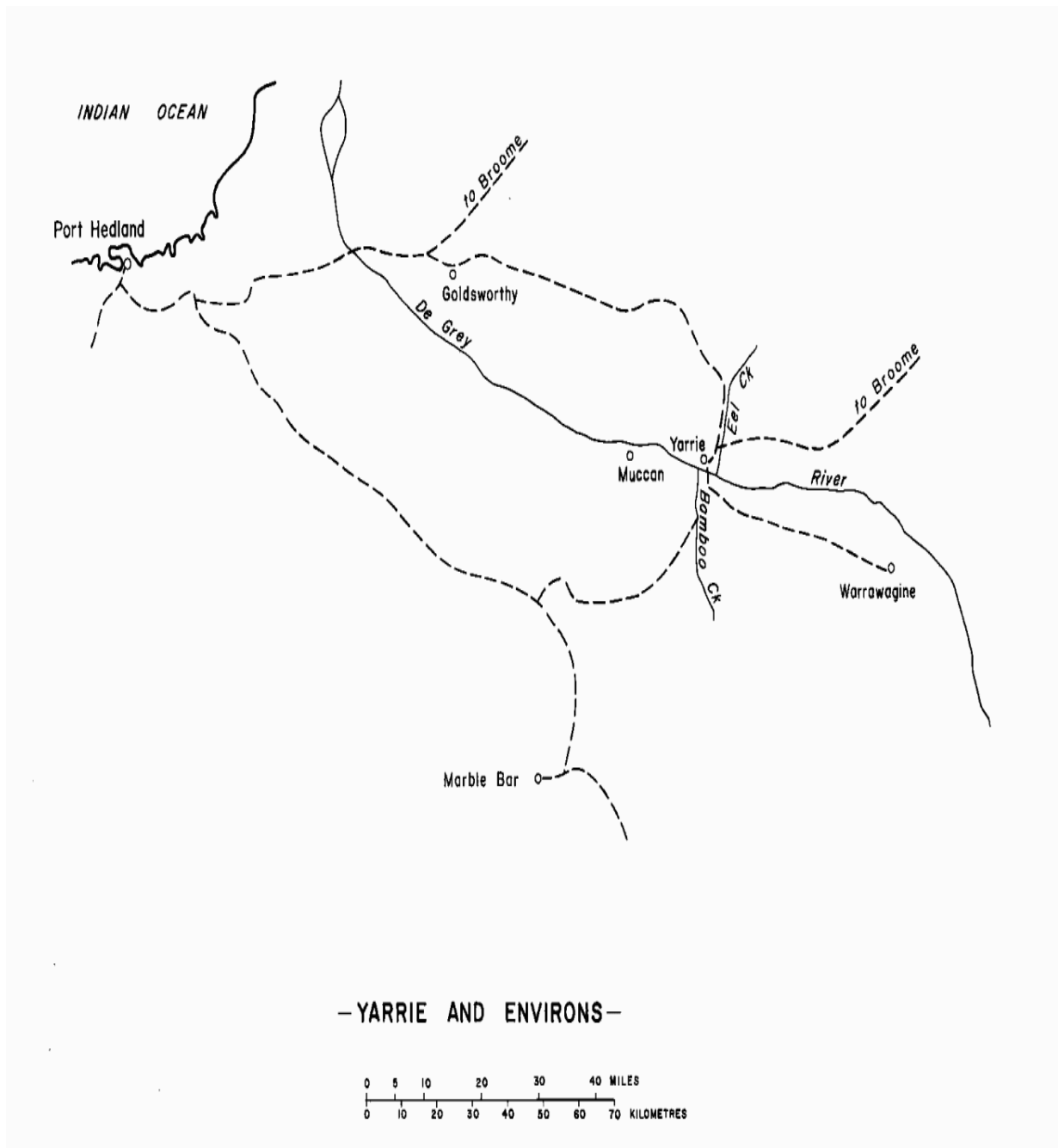


Sturt Creek



Secreting the 44 gallons

CHAPTER 5



CHAPTER 5

Yarrie - Enforced Stopover

Frank's family and friends call him Bidge. He is a big, but quiet man - not shy, just quietly spoken. His soft voice is deceiving. Its very softness demands an audience. When Frank speaks I listen. He is Mrs Welsh's second husband, so step-father to Langtree, a brash, handsome young man in the process of taking over the running of Yarrie station.

They ushered us onto the verandah to the smoko area. "How was the trip?" asked Frank.

"Okay till we got to your country," answered Chud. "What's with all this rain?"

"Yes, great, isn't it?" said Frank. People on the land in this part of Australia rarely complain about wet weather. Frank looked out over the soaking plain. The ironstone hill called Mundreenya loomed large out of the lifting clouds. "You know Chud, your old camp site is under about 15 feet of water right now. Just as well you're not trying to do that survey work this year." Frank saw our worried faces. "Never mind boys, looks like it's clearing right now."

Yes, maybe it was.

We joined the family for breakfast - our best breakfast since Wentworth.

After the meal, our first job was to clean out the Land-Rover after the panic-pack at Eel Creek. A grease and oil change followed then we fitted gauze in front of the radiator to protect it from spinifex husks. We found enough other chores to keep us occupied for the day - a day punctuated by long smokos.

The next day, still believing our stay at Yarrie would be only a few days, Langtree persuaded us to try our hands at riding horses and motor bikes.

"I want to see what kind of stockmen you government wonders would make," he said.

We did not impress Langtree.

My equestrian experience is limited to merry-go-rounds. At Yarrie I rode a wise old grey named Colin. Colin soon realised that I was no horseman, but he generously allowed me to believe I was in charge. If it suited Colin, he obeyed my commands quite promptly. If it did not suit him, he pretended I had not given the command. Colin did not gallop. He did not canter or even trot. He walked. And he enjoyed the scenery and several clumps of fresh, green grass.

As I rode past the homestead I saw Frank looking out at me from the verandah.

"Don't I remind you of Randolph Scott." I shouted.

"Not much," he called back.

I preferred Colin to the Yamaha. Unlike Colin this two-wheeled outlaw made no allowances for my inexperience. My main trouble was that I was never really sure which gear the bike was in. My other trouble was that in moments of uncertainty I sometimes turned the accelerator the wrong way.

On a clear track, having overcome my main trouble, speeding along in top gear, I was moved to imagine myself as "the leader of the pack." However, a sharp corner, a puddle of indeterminate depth or a gate would destroy my effervescent mood as was forced either to stop and wheel the bike or make a nervous descent through the gears.

My other trouble resulted in my Yamaha leaving a black tyre burn on the cement floor of the Yarrie workshop. My attempt to ride the bike up to the work-bench almost ended in tragedy. At the entrance to the building, in a moment of uncertainty, I accelerated instead of throttling back. I rectified this error as quickly as possible and the consequent tyre burn terminated very close to the servicing pit.

Initially, I was pleased that no one saw the near accident. However, I soon learned that very little escapes Frank's notice. A couple of nights later, as I remonstrated a point rather noisily and objectionably at pre-dinner drinks, Frank quietly interrupted me to say:

"Oh, by the way Russell, if you want to service the motorbike in the workshop, I'll show you how to go about it. For one thing, there's no need to park it over the pit."

The pre-dinner drinks were an established tradition at Yarrie - a very pleasant one. We all waited until Mrs Welsh came from the kitchen before starting. The only pause in the conversation was to listen to the radio stock market report, especially the mining shares.

Mrs Welsh is a superb raconteur. She acted out her stories with a great range of facial expressions and body movements. Frank's stories were finely expressed and often contained a point that only became obvious upon reflection. And Langtree? He laughed. An essential ingredient of any conversation group is an appreciative audience. Langtree filled that requirement most capably.

Another house-guest at Yarrie was old Jake: a tall, thin man of about sixty. I am not sure how he came to be at Yarrie, but he was living, unobtrusively, in the shearer's quarters. Jake had worked for most of his life in the Murchison River area of Western Australia. He could recall and recount, in great detail, everything that had ever happened to him on that river.

He was very patient with us, the southern smarties, who talked long and loud in a style of speech he found hard to understand. He looked on as Chud and I induced Langtree to laugh uproariously, Mrs Welsh to shake her head in disbelief and Frank to smile and, on occasions, to laugh quietly.

Old Jake allowed us to hold the stage but when our faster rate of beer consumption forced us to visit the toilet, Jake took over. We would return to

find him slowly recounting one of his Murchison memoirs. We drifted across to the meal table. Jake would follow, the shift of locale in no way affecting his delivery. Although Frank never asked a question that could have extended the story, he always heard Jake out with an indulgent, unflagging interest.

A few days after our arrival at Yarrie the rain eased. But the De Grey River did not go down. In the wet, the De Grey is a big river. It is the northernmost river of the Pilbara area of Western Australia and at Yarrie station, on the northern bank, the river has forced its way through the ironstone hills. Its main tributary is the Oakover. These two rivers were named and explored by Francis Gregory in 1861.

Francis, or Frank, was the younger brother, by two years, of Augustus Gregory. He was a talented explorer in his own right, but could not match the Bradmanesque exploits of his brother.

He first brought this talent to public notice in 1857. He was surveying grazing blocks along the Murchison River when he observed an unusually large volume of water flowing down that river. Correctly deducing that good rain had fallen in the hinterland, he realised that it was the right time to investigate inland. He temporarily abandoned his surveying and, with a single companion named Trigg, he discovered good pastoral land on the headwaters of the Murchison River. I told Jake about him.

When Frank Gregory came to the Pilbara he travelled east from Nicol Bay (Roebourne) and crossed the Yule, Shelley and Shaw Rivers before reaching the De Grey. He named this river after one of the sponsors of his expedition. He turned south-east to the Oakover and followed its waters south to the Davis River.

From here Frank Gregory ventured east and, like his brother at Sturt Creek, he entered the Great Sandy Desert. Also like his brother, he found it to be no place for men on horseback carrying their own water supply. His party covered barely 20 miles of desert before Gregory decided:

"It was quite evident that we had but little prospect of being able to cross the tract of dry sandy country."

He returned to the Oakover.

He traced this river back up to its junction with the De Grey which he followed out to the coastal districts of the north-west. So, some time in September 1861, Frank Gregory's party passed quite close to the site now occupied by Yarrie homestead - where Chud and I were house-guests in June 1968.

Our vehicle and equipment were now in order and we were ready to move on. But the land was not ready to take us. It was still flooded and water-logged.

Frank Welsh received a message. One of his neighbours, Mac, who managed Warrawagine station, was expected to arrive on the southern side of

the river with some fresh vegetables for Yarrie. However, with the river still deep and over one hundred yards wide, Frank lamented the fact that these supplies were beyond his reach.

"What about a boat?" asked Chud.'

"What d'you mean, a boat?" said Frank.

"A boat. Don't you have some kind of boat? We would row across and get the vegies."

"No Chud, there's no boat."

"There's the old punt," said Langtree.

"Punt? What punt? Where is it?" Chud was away.

The punt, a relic of some long ago wet season, did have the appearance of a boat. Almost ten feet long and constructed of sheet iron, it did not look particularly river-worthy. However, Chud's enthusiasm, once alight, is hard to extinguish. He used his Araldite to good effect and converted the holes in the punt to slow leaks. From material he found on the woodheap Chud constructed a pair of primitive paddles.

We tested the craft in a calm backwater of the river. It performed well considering the lack of expertise in its construction and repair. Our performance in the craft was not so commendable.

Two men, each with a paddle but with little confidence in their craft and no confidence in their fellow-paddler, do not make for rapid forward progress, let alone poetry in motion.

Undeterred by a poor rehearsal and further rain, Chud and I attacked the mighty De Grey.

We launched a good half mile upstream, on the northern bank, from the point we wished to reach on the southern bank. After only two capsize we made land on the southern bank, about half a mile downstream from the point we had aimed for.

We found Mac. He was on foot. His Land-Rover was stuck in Bamboo Creek, eight miles back along the road, so he had walked on to the De Grey. He declined our offer to join us in the punt for the trip across to Yarrie. He looked at us and our craft and decided to swim the river.

Mac stayed the night at Yarrie but he was unable to join us in the prevailing holiday mood. His wife was waiting for him to collect her from Port Hedland after a visit to Perth. He was trying to shear in this unseasonal weather. His last vehicle, loaded with supplies, was now stuck in a creek only eight miles from Yarrie, but nearly 40 miles from Warrawagine. And, to top it all, heavy rain was falling again.

The next morning Chud and I wanted to help. One of the Yarrie vehicles is kept on the south side of the river during the wet season. I won the toss and chose to swim across the river while Chud ferried a nervous Mac over in the punt. I was disappointed. They both arrived dry. Chud drove us back to Bamboo

Creek in the Yarrie vehicle.

Mac spoke only once. He asked Chud to stop. He got out of the vehicle and picked up a road sign lying in the middle of the road. He placed it, upright, beside the road some distance further on.

"It was raining so heavy here yesterday, I tried using the sign as an umbrella. But was too bloody heavy to carry above my head," he explained.

In view of the recent rain, Mac was relieved to see his Land-Rover still parked in the centre of Bamboo Creek. The water was up to bonnet level. We towed it across with the Yarrie Land-Rover and loaded some of the fresh, but often soggy, supplies onto the Yarrie vehicle. We broached a carton and drank a couple of beers before parting - Mac for Warrawagine, us for Yarrie.

Back on the Dr Grey's south bank, Chud and I now had mail and fresh vegetables, both of which were long overdue at Yarrie. Could we risk transporting them across the river by punt?

The splash of water on the hull of a boat is renowned for transforming mature men into young boys. It certainly does Chud. Once afloat, with a paddle in his hand, he becomes reckless, jocular, ungainly and ineffective. I tried to impress upon him the fact that we would not be popular at Yarrie if we consigned their mail to waters that would ultimately deliver it to the Indian Ocean.

"This time," I pleaded, "be serious."

"No worries," he said – but with a grin.

We carried the punt upstream. I placed the mail bag and a bag containing about twenty potatoes in the centre of the punt. As captain, I sat in the front and ordered Chud into the back. We launched.

Where the De Grey had overflowed its banks the water was shallow and flowing gently and presenting no problems to our craft. Chud's efforts to sing as we rowed I found both inappropriate and disconcerting.

"Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream."

I told him to shut up.

Towards the centre of the river the water deepened. The several channels were lined with large paperbark trees around which the water swirled and eddied violently. Our method of crossing this section was to steer generally downstream and gain small amounts of across-stream as the current and trees allowed.

"OK. Here we go." I warned Chud as we pushed tentatively into the fast-flowing current.

"No worries," said Chud.

We combined well. By concentrating hard, without any communication, we made good progress. Our confidence grew.

I hummed, too quietly for Chud to hear, one of my father's bathroom favourites.

"Sandy the strong.

Sandy the wise,
Maker of man.
“Breaker of lies.”

Then, out loud, I foolishly issued an instruction.

“Left of that one on the right, mate.”

“What’s that?” asked Chud.

“Left of that one on the right,” I repeated – hurriedly.

“What? Left or right of what one?” Chud demanded.

“That big bastard there...look out”

“We’re going to...” Chud never finished the sentence. He began to giggle. I knew we were in trouble.

A large tree rushed towards us. I dropped my paddle, leaned back and grabbed the mail bag. I looked up and saw an almost horizontal branch of the tree directly above me. Instinctively, I locked my arms around it, still clutching the mail bag. I then swung my legs around the same substantial branch and hung there, like a sloth hangs from a tree. My back was only inches above the rushing water.

Chud, on seeing my panic exit, began to back-paddle furiously. This action, combined with my sudden departure from the front of the punt, caused the rear of the punt to submerge. Then the front rose in such a manner that it struck me a painful blow in the centre of my back. As the punt went under it swung gently around into the tree and so enabled Chud, still giggling, to have time to grab the now damp potato bag and stand up and step neatly into the same tree. He even retained his paddle.

In view of the punt's previously displayed propensity to sink under our occupancy, we had tied an empty, sealed four-gallon drum to the end of a rope. The other end of rope we had attached to the punt. Fortunately, this drum snagged around the tree. So now, the three of us - Chud, myself and the punt - suffering various degrees of immersion, were marooned, centre-stream in the De Grey River.

I waited for Chud to stop laughing before I issued my first order.

"Get over here and take this bloody mail bag so I can get out of this."

We secured the mail and the potatoes higher up in the tree and set about re-floating the punt. Even a small punt, immersed in rushing water, is very heavy. A body, partially immersed in rushing water, with one arm occupied in securing that body to a tree, is in no position to lift. Our methods were ill-judged and strongly debated at the time, but after a half-hour struggle we succeeded in re-floating the punt.

I convinced Chud that my chances of reaching the opposite bank in the punt, with the mail and potatoes, would be better if he swam there. Once again I placed the goods in the centre of the punt. I lowered myself in behind them. Chud, finally aware of the gravity of the situation, handed me his paddle and released the punt. The current rushed me away.

I sat upright and stone-faced. Timidly, I placed the tip of the paddle in the water to keep the craft pointing downstream. I allowed co-operative currents to gradually ease me over to the Yarrie bank. At no time did I feel inclined to sing. I made land a long way downstream from the Yarrie homestead. I dragged the punt ashore and began the long walk up to the homestead. I found a track. Frank and Langtree, in their Land-Rover, found me.

Frank said, "I didn't know whether to come down and get you myself or call up Muccan and ask them to catch you as you went by their place."

Muccan homestead is also on the De Grey River - twelve miles downstream from Yarrie.

For tea that night, Mrs Welsh happily included potatoes in the meal instead of rice. Chud and I happily ate them pleased to have been the providers.

In the next few days we made several sorties across the river for provisions with none of the watery mishaps that occurred on the earlier trips. The river level stayed high. The showers persisted. We were running out of things to do.

Chud felt wheel-wobble when he drove our Land-Rover on smooth roads. We jacked up the front of the vehicle, moved the steering-wheel to simulate turns and looked very hard at the steering mechanism. It looked okay to us. We hosed and polished the vehicle. We vacuumed out the inside. We re-packed the tucker box. We waited for smoko and meal bells.

Frank said to Mrs Welsh, "Let's put these government wonders to work."

He suggested we paint the shearers' quarters. Chud and I spread the contents of every tin and every part tin of paint that could be found, on the interior of these quarters. Old Jake had to move out, temporarily. The assorted types and colours of paint ensured a spectacular colour scheme. We assumed that the shearers would agree with us that any colour of paint is better than no paint. We exhausted the supply, washed out the brushes and left them to dry. What next?

One resident of Yarrie who appreciated our idleness was Ted. Ted's sheep-dog, cattle-dog origins were confused. He loved a game or a walk. The mention of the word "river" transported Ted into clumsy, unpredictable pirouettes of such momentum that any furniture or persons within his circumference of turn was in danger of being overturned. He knew that a discussion featuring this word often meant that some person would be walking down to check the level of the De Grey.

In the course of this half-mile walk, Ted covered several miles. He raced ahead and inspected extensive acreages on both sides of the track. However, he regularly returned to check the progress and well-being of the walker. A shout of "yeah Ted" would send him frolicking forward again.

After each walk Ted felt obliged to verify that no person had deserted Yarrie in his absence. The verification ensured that each member of the

Yarrie household received the imprint of at least two muddy paws upon their person, often when they were least expecting such a mark of affection.

Ted's only possession was a small rubber ball. No human limb could project this ball beyond Ted's range of fetching. His method of gaining human involvement in the activity was based on persistence. He placed his ample body directly in front of the prospective thrower, dropped the saliva-covered ball and stared pleadingly with a mute but eloquent "please" on his canine countenance. This routine, Ted could perform, ad infinitum.

Sleeping in my swag on a bed on the back verandah, there were many occasions when the last sound I heard at night and the first sound I heard in the morning was identical - the sound of Ted's sticky ball bouncing beside my bed and the patter of Ted's feet marking time - waiting.

He was not a clever dog. His good natured enthusiasm, the undiluted honesty of his facial expressions and the total lack of deceit in his behaviour led me to call him Barnaby Ted. He reminded me of Dickens' Barnaby Rudge.

The only residents at Yarrie we did not meet were the station aborigines. I occasionally glimpsed the shy, black faces of women in the kitchen. Of the men, I saw only indistinct outlines down at their camp, on the wood-heap or riding by on horses. I recall only one figure, Malcolm, who invariably caught my eye with either his bright red shirts or his smile, flashing like a mirror in the sun.

And still the rain continued.

On our eighth night at Yarrie, over one inch of rain fell. It was time for action. When the elements refuse to relent and inconvenience human endeavour, it is time for human resistance. I know the resistance is token and of infinitely small proportions when compared to the all-encompassing power of the elements. However, the finest chapters of the history of mankind concern protests, usually ineffective, against insurmountable odds.

"I'll show this bloody weather," I declared.

Despite the moderately heavy rain still falling and the water-logged condition of the countryside, I decided to show my contempt for the elements and go for a walk in the hills. I put on my boots, my overalls, my hat, my oversized plastic raincoat and left the homestead yard.

The going became easier once I decided to stop trying to keep my feet dry. At the base of the hills, I removed my boots and socks. I wrung the socks out and emptied water out of the boots before putting them back on. My feet were now only damp, not saturated.

I walked up a narrow gorge to the top of the hills. Streams of water poured through and over the rocks forming many small waterfalls. The gurgling of these rushing watercourses combined with the steady patter of raindrops on my hat to provide backing as I sang to myself.

From the bottom of these hills I saw only the vertical space they

occupied. Once atop I saw how extensively they occupied horizontal space - or just how much land they covered. I meandered around the ridges of rock, circuitously heading for the highest point. Was it my imagination or was the weather clearing? My protest was succeeding.

I reached the highest point. Fortunately, I had not bothered to bring my camera so I was free to view the scene without worrying about recording it on film. I enjoyed the experience.

For the first few minutes, I sat to catch my breath. A rat came from behind a stone. He looked at me, undecided. In order to run away he had to take his eyes from mine. He made the effort and scampered off. I looked around at the country. Earth and sky locked together by misty rain. The grey above accentuated the rich browns and greens below. I felt a part of the scene. I saw, without transmitting the impression to my brain for analysis and comprehension. Then I strained to see further. To penetrate the indistinct. Gradually, my consciousness intruded. No longer was I a part of the scene. Aware of my own presence I became, once again, an intruder.

The country lay before me like a map. The surface water on the airstrip stood out. The Yarrie yards looked small beside the wide scar of the De Grey River in flood. Beyond, to the east, lay Callawa country and beyond Callawa, the desert we hoped to travel. The same desert from which a surveyor named Lewis led the ravaged Warburtons to succour and relief in the Pilbara.

Historians are unanimous in the belief that Colonel Warburton's expedition across the Great Sandy Desert was an heroic one. Warburton's own account of this expedition shows that J.N. Lewis, a South Australian, was the hero of this expedition.

In April 1873, Warburton led a well-equipped party out of Alice Springs aiming to reach Perth by the most direct route. The knowledge that both Giles and Gosse were in the field for the same purpose, gave Warburton added incentive to proceed west.

The expedition organisers appointed Warburton the leader of this party on the strength of his service in India and his recent exploratory trips to Lake Eyre. Warburton had only a mediocre military career and, more significantly, in 1873 he was sixty years old. Warburton's son, Richard, was second in command and his most notable qualification for this position appears to have been his relationship to the leader. Lewis, a cook named Dennis White, two Afghan camel men, an aborigine named Charley and a team of 17 camels made up the party.

The Warburton method of travel was simple. Lewis, and Charley or one of the Afghans, searched ahead to find sufficient water to support the entire party. On finding the water they returned and guided the main body of the party to this water. Then Lewis went forward again, looking for the next water supply. In this manner Warburton crossed the Great Sandy Desert.

Lewis is spoken of as an experienced bushman and surveyor "in the

prime vigour of manhood." Lewis's vigour and experience saved the Warburton expedition from a Leichhardt or Burke and Wills fate.

It was an horrific journey. Warburton's diary is a relentless sequence of suffering. Ants, flies, lack of water, food and shade, unco-operative aborigines and camels, along with countless sandridges competed with each other to hinder the progress of the expedition.

The search for water drew Warburton north-west, rather than south-west, of Alice Springs, to Waterloo Wells. From these wells the party travelled between the sandridges, so their direction of travel became west north-west. The northing element led Warburton to believe he was close to Gregory's Salt Lake - the terminal of Augustus Gregory's Sturt Creek. Warburton investigated the country north, where he estimated the lake to be. He found only sandridges.

Warburton's diary indicates that he had trouble with his navigation. After failing to find Gregory's Salt Lake he had no confidence in his determinations of longitude. At each camp there was conjecture as to where the party really was. The faulty location of Joanna Spring, made on this expedition, was to have fatal consequences 20 years later.

Near Joanna Spring, about three-quarters of the way across the desert, Warburton realised he was too far north.. He knew of Frank Gregory's Oakover River on the edge of the desert. This river became his target. In order to reach it his direction changed to west south-west and the south element meant crossing sandridges - an action the impoverished party was in no condition to perform.

On 8 November 1873, Warburton told his men that a three day march would bring them to the Oakover. However, it was not until 4 December that Lewis led the remnants of the party out of the desert onto a tributary of the Oakover River.

Once again, Lewis set up camp for the ailing Warburtons then, with one of the Afghan camel men, he travelled 170 miles down the Oakover and De Grey Rivers (past the site of Yarrie) to a pioneer outpost near the mouth of the De Grey. He returned to the Oakover camp with the provisions that enabled the Warburton party to reach civilisation.

They arrived at Roebourne, at the end of January 1874. As the leader of this successful expedition, Warburton received a hero's welcome in Perth and again in Adelaide. The Royal Geographic Society awarded Warburton their prestigious Gold Medal for 1874. He is recognised in Australian history as the first man to cross from Central Australia to the West Australian coast.

As early as July 1874, Lewis led a survey party north from Adelaide with the unenviable task of mapping Lake Eyre.

Sitting on top of the ironstone hill, overlooking the superabundance of water covering the land, I could not identify it as that which had so ravaged Warburton's party.

Behind me, in the west, the weather was breaking - I could not see any

blue sky but, in the distance, shafts of light bathed areas of land in bright sunlight and gave me hope that the cloud cover was breaking up.

I walked slowly down from the hills and back to the homestead.

This day the weather changed for the better. Further rain did fall after my walk in the hills, however, it was restricted to showers and we no longer talked, or even joked, about spending the winter marooned at Yarrie.

The next morning the sun shone brightly. Frank introduced us to a powdery substance called Taylorite. When mixed with water it became a lime-smelling paint.

"The roof," said Frank, "is dull. You paint it with this stuff and it will shine. We need to have the roof shiny so aeroplanes will not miss it, okay?" He pointed to the brushes and showed us a ladder. Chud and I were busy again.

After two days without rain we finished the Taylorite. The De Grey still flowed fast and high but the roads away from the river were now trafficable. A route to Port Hedland was open. The railway bridge across the De Grey below the mining town of Goldsworthy, downstream from Yarrie, was open to traffic.

Frank fixed a trailer to his Land-Rover. Yarrie needed supplies. Old Jake was quite frisky and talked more than ever at the prospect of going to Hedland and, from there, returning to his beloved Murchison. He and Frank set off together with Chud and myself following in our Land-Rover. We hoped to take delivery of the extra-heavy-duty springs Chud had ordered when in Alice Springs.

The road was slippery so the pace was slow. Chud stopped to photograph an area of Sturt Desert Pea. We lost sight of Frank's vehicle. A few miles later we came upon Frank's trailer in the middle of the track. It had worked loose without Frank or Jake noticing. Chud and I laughed as we connected the trailer to our Land-Rover. At last we had something on Frank. We hurried on till Frank's vehicle came into view. We flashed our headlights and tooted the horn. Frank stopped. He looked back and saw his trailer was missing. Chud and I attacked.

"Hey, old-timer, your load shifted, has it?"

"Not used to pulling a trailer mate?"

"Frank, would you notice if the back wheel came off?"

"You blokes doze off or something."

Frank looked at us. He removed his hat and scratched his head. He stared at the vacant tow-bar at the rear of his vehicle. He spoke quietly and although there was no trace of a smile, his eyes laughed.

"Mmm yes, how about that. Jake was telling me about the Murchison River. I was very interested in his story. I didn't notice a thing."

Jake stood by, seriously nodding his assent. Chud and I raised our hands to cover the smiles breaking out on our faces. We turned away from the two

men, unable to trust ourselves to speak without laughing. With lowered heads we re-fixed the trailer to Frank's Land-Rover. Frank and Jake looked on.

Port Hedland is not my kind of town. There is some unattractive ribbon development along the highway then several miles of an embankment road over stagnant water to the town centre. Even after the long wet season the atmosphere was dusty and close. However, we enjoyed the luxury of steak and draught beer.

Mrs Welsh was a traditional sheep farmer and still resisting Langtree's plan to introduce cattle to Yarrie. While Yarrie mutton is excellent tucker, a large T-bone steak is my favourite meal. Similarly, bottled beer in good company also approaches excellence, but a glass of cold beer, freshly drawn and drunk at the bar, is close to perfection.

Our Land-Rover springs had not arrived. To ease the frustration caused by this further delay, Chud and I sampled the beer at each hotel. We drank farewell beers with old Jake - a good old guy, we agreed. He caught the first available plane south. Frank stayed with friends, but he joined us that night for further drinks.

After closing time, Chud successfully drove out of the town centre and found an area of vacant land where we camped. We made a drunken, dusty camp - much to the delight of the local mosquito population. I did not sleep well. I woke early and put on my overalls - belated protection for my mosquito-ravaged body. I resorted to coffee. I turned on the radio. What was happening in the outside world?

My already sombre mood pitched into total blackness when I heard that Tony Hancock was dead - taken his own life - here in Australia.

Tony Hancock. My old friend of so many riotous half-hours on ABC radio. Old Tub: the pompous, the pretentious, ridiculing himself and exposing human vanity. Demolishing self-deceivers. Not for me the Goon Show - even when TV arrived, I returned to radio for Hancock Half Hour replays. Many of his sequences I knew off by heart. Many of his expressions I have made my own. HHH's regularly restored my ailing spirits - helped me to ride through homesickness, disappointments, plans thwarted, personal failures, even lost love. Old Hancock, my restorative, dead. And suicide, here in Australia.

I never realised I owed him anything until that morning on the outskirts of Hedland when I heard he had died. It was tragedy enough that he took his own life, but how many years of misery did Hancock endure to attain this state of ultimate despair? There's the real suffering. No case of "physician heal thyself" here. It wasn't fair. This man, whose business was laughter, could not help himself.

I turned off the radio. If that was the outside world, could do without it. To this day I connect Port Hedland with Tony Hancock's death. No wonder I don't like the place.

We returned to Yarrie. It would be more pleasant to wait for the springs there.

"Don't worry about the springs fellas," said Frank. "I bought enough Taylorite for a second coat while I was in Hedland."

Chud believed that the only way to get rid of Frank's Taylorite was to spread it on the roof. The day the Taylorite ran out, on the third coat, we received a message from the Port Hedland agent. Our springs were in town.

This time we drove to Hedland, collected the springs and returned to Yarrie in a single day. I bet Frank 20 cents we would be back at Yarrie in time for pre-dinner drinks at half-past five. I lost. We did not return to Yarrie via the Goldsworthy bridge. We came via the Warrawagine road and left our Land-Rover on the southern side of the De Grey.

The water barely reached my chest as I waded across the river to the homestead. The time to leave Yarrie was at hand.

Of course, with the country drying out, Chud and I were anxious to be on our way again. However, our enthusiasm to depart was tinged with regret to be leaving Yarrie.,

The next morning we fitted the new springs to the Land-Rover. The cabin rode high with an almost racy look.'

On 1 July, sixteen days after our dawn crossing of Eel Creek, we left Yarrie. Mrs Welsh gave us plenty of food. Frank and Langtree came down to the river to see us off.

A road, east from Yarrie, intersects the Canning Stock Route at Well 33. Frank said, "You blokes keep in touch with the Flying Doctor base at Hedland as you go up the stock-route. I might drive out and see you at Well 33. It's only 600 miles from here."

I thought he was kidding.

"It's not like a trip in to Hedland, Frank. I don't think you could manage it without old Jake to keep you awake."

"Don't you Canning Tourists worry about me," he replied.

"Anyhow, where's that 20 cents I won from you?"

"Listen Bidge," I said. "I'll go you double or nothing you won't come out to Well 33."

"Okay. You're on. If you get there, so will I."

We shook hands with Bidge and Langtree and waded across the De Grey.

Now for Balfour Downs and our second fuel dump, then Meekatharra to meet Noel, then Wiluna and the start of the Canning Stock Route.



A view of Yarrie country

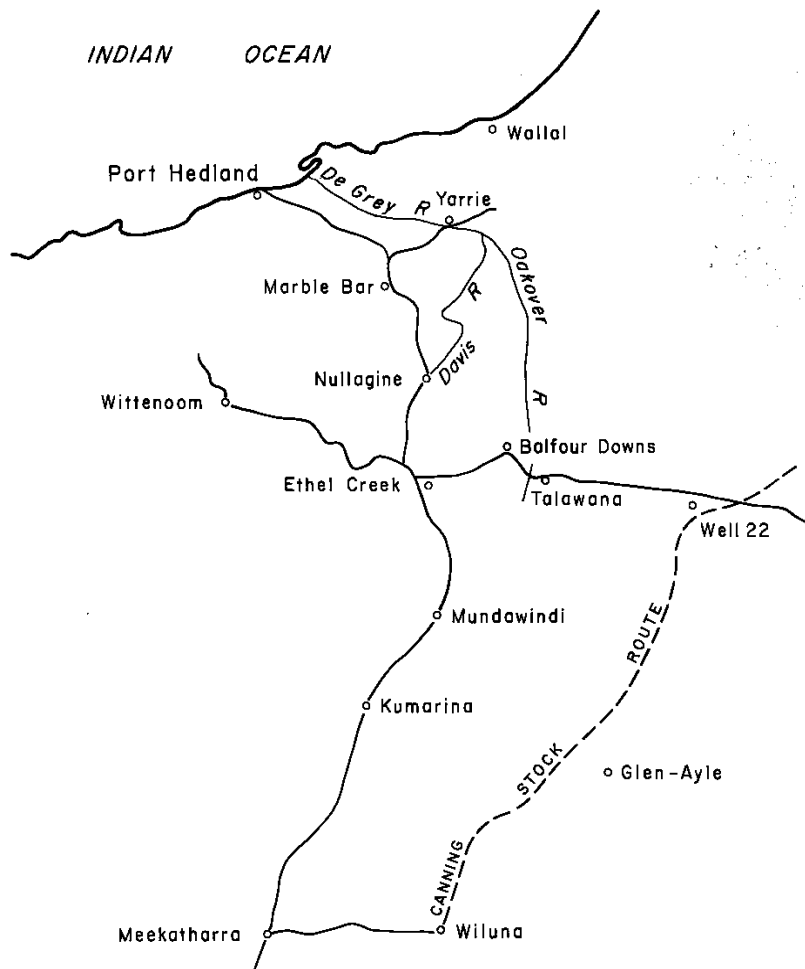


De Grey in flood

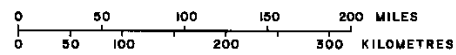


Ready to leave Yarrie

CHAPTER 6



— YARRIE TO WILUNA —



CHAPTER 6

Yarrie to Balfour Downs

We headed for Marble Bar.

The first landmark on our route, Talga Talga homestead, was described as abandoned on our map. "Abandoned" said it all. We drove on to the Talga River, a pleasant, sandy stream. But looks can be deceiving. The river held in its grasp a Land-Rover with trailer. A worried Dutchman appeared and claimed ownership. He had walked to Talga Talga homestead only to discover its abandoned condition.

"We'll soon have you out," said Chud confidently.

The Dutchman's face brightened.

We towed his vehicle up the bank of the river.

"Oo...tanks," he said.

Many young European men, with only a few years of Australian experience - and that experience is usually confined to the city - buy a four-wheel drive vehicle and confidently head for the outback. They think possession of the vehicle is enough. They do not realise that some driving skill and a knowledge of the vehicle's workings is also required before they can travel with safety throughout Australia.

In many ways they are foolhardy and naive and quite unprepared for the dangers likely to confront them. They come in for a good deal of criticism - and worse - from the police and station owners. However, I reckon their fault of non-preparedness - or more correctly, non-awareness of what they are letting themselves in for - is a less grievous fault than the extreme caution displayed by many Australians, who, with a good knowledge of their country and its conditions, will not venture beyond the bitumen.

The Dutchman would not stop thanking us. We could not get away. He gave us the address of his parents in Rotterdam, despite my assurances that we were limiting our travels to the Australian continent. He promised to call in at Yarrie and report that the "government wonders" had crossed the Talga River.

We reached Marble Bar early in the afternoon.

Marble Bar. A town like no other town. A town that has become a legend. A town that strikes fear and pride into the hearts of most Australians. Fear, that they should ever have to live there. Pride, that some fellow Australians do live there and perpetuate the legend.

Marble Bar owes its beginning to the Pilbara gold strikes of the 1880s. The town reached a population peak of 1500 before the turn of the century. The population now hovers between three and four hundred. It has remained a centre for local government administration and small scale mining camps

in the area. The large scale mining enterprises constructed their own transport facilities to the coast, rather than utilise the limited facilities of this awkwardly placed town.

The town is imprisoned within a network of stony hills. It is inconveniently placed a few miles east of the Coongan River. However, Marble Bar has two features which make it unique in Australia.

The first is a reef of jasper across the nearby Coongan River. This reef is the main tourist attraction and gives the town its name despite the vast difference between jasper and marble. Unfortunately, the reef is gradually disappearing. Many tourists remove a piece of the bar in order to possess material evidence that they have been to Marble Bar.

There is nothing phoney about the town's other unique feature - heat. Every day, from 31 October 1923 to 17 April 1924, the maximum temperature was over 100 degrees Fahrenheit. One hundred and seventy days - a record. This statistic is mathematical proof that Marble Bar is a hot town. The people who live there require no such proof. The state of their armpits, brows and tongues continually remind them that the town is a hot one.

Marble Bar has most of the attributes of the typical Australian. Rough and ready. Tough and resilient. Making do without any obvious effort. A drinking town, retaining its individualism despite contrary influences. No affectation and imported affectation does not survive for long in Marble Bar.

When we were working in the area the previous year, our survey teams invaded the town. The policeman and the publican had things well organised. The policeman directed our vehicles to a vacant block within walking distance of the town's focal point - the Ironclad Hotel.

We played up in the bar for most of the day and night. Our team beat a team of locals, containing the policeman, at darts and then refused a rematch: highly obnoxious behaviour in any town. Admittedly, when we started singing we were asked to stop. But we were asked in a polite and considerate manner.

"Look boys, it's one of our rules here. No singing in the bar. Do you mind?" said the policeman.

We resorted to reciting poetry, equally noisily. The publican and the policeman exchanged winks. They both knew that the average working man's repertoire of verse is small. They allowed us to carry on. A couple of minutes later our supply of poetry was exhausted. We began arm-wrestling, a relatively quiet activity.

And it wasn't just at the hotel. The cafe across the road served us a good meal at a fair price. Big steaks with two eggs and plenty of bread. A full bottle of sauce at each table.

The girl at the telephone exchange was a good sort too.

Our young Glenn, in his second year of marriage, was enduring his first separation from his wife. Unwisely perhaps, he rang her – at their home in

Orange, New South Wales - from the public phone in the hotel lobby. He claimed he spoke with her for 20 minutes before we found him. Then every member of the survey parties, 15 in all, came to the phone and introduced themselves to the surprised young lady. A few gave her highly imaginative, totally fictional accounts of Glenn's activities in the desert and Marble Bar. Several intoxicated locals who happened to pass through the lobby at the time, also availed themselves of the opportunity to meet Glenn's wife. Eventually, Glen took over again and after another lengthy conversation the girl at the telephone exchange interrupted.

"Excuse me, your six minutes is up. Are you extending."

"Er...no. No thanks. Thanks very much," said young Glenn.

I like Marble Bar.

On this, my second visit there, we purchased a 44 gallon drum of petrol – for our Balfour Downs fuel dump – and loaded it into the Land-Rover. The new springs took the weight easily. Once again we packed our other belongings as best we could. This time we put the tucker box on the roof rack. Chud and I enjoyed a few quiet beers – "sentimentals" Chud called them – at the Ironclad before leaving town.

Travelling south, we paused to help a West Australian government employee extricate his caravan from Brockman Creek. The country was still wet.

At Nullagine, Chud rang Perth and spoke to Noel.

Yes, he had organised the hire of a portable transceiver which would keep us in touch with the various Flying Doctor bases when we travelled up the stock route. He would meet us in Meekatharra in ten days' time. I was a little disappointed. I wanted to get to Wiluna and start the trip proper as soon as possible. I did not anticipate any trouble establishing our fuel dump and proceeding south. That would only take a couple of days.

I was wrong. Chud and I needed all but one of the ten days to reach Meekatharra.

We camped south of Nullagine. The next day we left the main road at Roy Hill for Ethel Creek station. Once again we saw water on and beside the road. At Ethel Creek the news was not encouraging.

"Well, they're getting through to Balfour," a station hand told us. He looked at our heavily laden vehicle and shook his head.

Not only did we have to reach Balfour Downs. We had to follow a desert track nearly 200 miles beyond Balfour to its intersection with the Canning Stock Route near Well 22. Rather than receive bad news, I decided not to inquire on the condition of the road past Balfour Downs.

The country was green. Kangaroos abounded. However, Chud and I only had eyes for the road before us and, all too often, the water covering it.

The centre of the road surface, even under the water, was usually firm.

Years of traffic had compacted the surface to a degree where it could not be permeated by water. The danger lay at the edges which had missed most of the compaction.

We entered our first bog shortly after ten o'clock. Chud lost control of the Land-Rover, ever so slightly, on a slippery corner. A four wheel drift took the driver's side wheels, front and back, ever so slightly, off the edge of the road. When Chud tried to regain the centre of the road the vehicle did not go forward. It went down. But only on Chud's side. The passenger side wheels, front and back, still on the firm surface of the road, began to lift as the driver's side wheels sank further. The Land-Rover leaned over at such an alarming angle that Chud could not open the door on his side.

Stories of bogging and the extraction of bogged vehicles are many and varied. No two bogs are the same. What works for one vehicle in one bog does not work for the same vehicle in a similar bog. By the same rule, what works for one vehicle in a bog does not work for a similar vehicle in the same bog. There are too many variables. Every bog has its own unique features. I offer only one rule for getting out of bogs: be patient, don't rush it.

In our first bog for the day, Chud and I made the common mistake of trying to back out after only a little digging. We wanted to be on the move again. All we achieved at our first attempt was to sink the wheels a little further. Once we admitted that this bog was not one that we could easily escape, we relaxed and attacked the job properly.

First we unloaded the Land-Rover. Men who handle 44 gallon drums of petrol regularly throw them around as if they are made of balsa. Chud and I do not handle 44 gallon drums of petrol regularly. We find them awkward and heavy, and hard to unload.

Chud began digging around and under the wheels of the Land- Rover. I collected stones and chopped down trees to fill the holes Chud was digging. We jacked the vehicle up, dug and filled again and again - half a dozen times at least. It's work, but it's good honest work. Essential work. And, when you escape the bog, satisfying work.

We did a good job. Chud backed out of the bog, over our path of trees and stones, onto the centre of the road.

Resuming our journey to Balfour Downs, Chud drove more slowly and kept strictly to the centre of the road. We reached, and safely crossed, Jiggalong Creek at midday. The creek flowed clear over a sandy bed. We bathed, washed out our muddy clothes and put on clean ones before eating our lunch. Without breaking into the good clobber, we wanted to appear respectable or at the very least, presentable, on our arrival at Balfour Downs homestead.

Ten miles beyond Jiggalong Creek we bogged again.

"Aw, come on Chud. Once is funny," I said.

As it was not the first time, we acted more calmly. I found plenty of stones

within carrying distance, so this bog did not delay us more than half an hour. It did, however, transform our appearance into something less than presentable.

We could not expect to reach Balfour without bogging again. We decided not to risk another set of clean clothes.

John, of Balfour Downs, greeted us warmly. He shook our muddy hands and did not comment on our mud-splattered appearance. Indeed, he would have been surprised had we arrived otherwise.

John was six-foot tall, clean shaven but with a bristling Henry Lawson-like moustache. He spoke, slowly, of bogs, bad roads and past and future rains. We did not stay long. The fuel dump was uppermost in our minds. We could not fully relax while the drum of petrol was in the vehicle. It was like a millstone around our necks.

John told us that some geologists, in two Land-Rovers, had passed through the day before. They were heading for a point beyond the Canning Stock Route. On the strength of this information Chud and I assumed the road to be in a reasonable condition.

We assumed wrong.

Only seven miles west of Balfour the front wheels of our Land-Rover went down in a sticky mess created by the vehicles before us. We worked hard for half an hour and succeeded in getting the back wheels into the same bog. Once again another innocent stand of mulga was sacrificed to provide a base that enabled our vehicle to escape to firm ground.

Beyond the Balfour Downs home paddocks, the watercourses were fewer. We camped at twilight and, with only one other bog during the afternoon, our spirits were high. It would have been a perfect desert camp but for the black clouds streaming across from the west, blocking out the stars and threatening rain.

I felt happy with the day's work. In the face of difficulty we had made good progress into the desert. I have received a day's wages on several occasions for doing no more than bogging a vehicle early in the morning and spending the rest of the day extricating it. On those days I always considered I have earned my pay. Regrettably, my supervising surveyors have not shared my opinion.

Chud was also basking in the comfort that comes with the knowledge that one has worked well and made progress. He wanted to talk about it.

"A bloke'd be buggered out here without a shovel and an axe," he said

Early next morning we crossed the headwaters of the Oakover River and passed through the rabbit-proof fence at mile post 672.

This fence was a significant point. At last we were getting somewhere. The rabbit-proof fence survey was a Canning survey. Canning, the man whose stock route we aimed to drive. At the fence we crossed Canning's trail.

Alfred Wernham Canning's father worked a farm in Victoria. Alfred

was born in 1860 and he qualified to practise as a surveyor in New South Wales. He worked for the Lands Department in Bega, Cooma and Bathurst before going to the West in 1893. He soon proved himself a capable surveyor working in the country between Albany and Eucla.

Western Australia was expecting other, more numerous, visitors from the east in the 1890s: rabbits.

In 1859 an unthinking Victorian imported rabbits into Australia. The rabbits, being rabbits, went forth and multiplied - and spread. The Perth government of the day decided to make an effort to keep the rabbits out of their farmlands. Canning began the survey of a line for a rabbit-proof fence. At Starvation Harbour, between Albany and Esperance on the Great Australian Bight, he headed north into the interior of the state.

The survey reached a point near Southern Cross. Such was the government's respect for the mobility of the rabbit population, Canning was asked to extend the survey line further north, into the Wiluna district, then on to include the Pilbara region, carrying on to the Indian Ocean at Cape Karaudren, north of the mouth of the De Grey River.

During 1902 Canning, Trotman and a camel man, Hasan, explored the northern section to find a practicable route for the fence to follow. There were many factors to be considered. The fence had to be positioned east of the settled areas of Western Australia and west of the oncoming rabbits.

Naturally, the availability of water - surface and underground - was of paramount importance. The search for water occupied most of Canning's time. On some sections all the men were forced to wash in the same pint of water. The route needed to pass close to any forest areas capable of providing the timber required in the construction of the fence. As well as these restrictions Canning had to avoid rugged country that would make the building of the fence difficult and expensive.

One of the Canning party's supply points was Balfour Downs. Here the men enjoyed the Spartan comforts offered by the pioneer homestead. Then, as now, Balfour Downs was the last station before the desert.

Travelling a line between the desert and the Oakover River, Canning pushed north. When he reached the vicinity of the Oakover-De Grey River junction many months had elapsed since he had last reported his progress to his superiors in Perth. He also needed to order extra supplies. Canning sent Trotman and Hasan to the river junction to wait, while he set off on camel, for Wallal, the nearest telegraph office.

Canning had covered only forty of the hundred-odd miles to Wallal when his camel died. He walked on. His unerring sense of direction brought him to the telegraph line less than a quarter of a mile from his target.

Unassumingly, Canning entered the office and lodged his report for sending to Perth, along with his request for supplies. The telegraph operator

informed Canning that the government had expressed concern for the safety of his party. Canning could not understand why. They were only overdue.

With his business at Wallal completed, Canning calmly turned again to the desert for the walk back to the river junction. The telegraph operator apparently showed some amazement at Canning's intention to return to his men cross-country. He suggested that Canning follow the coast road south to the De Grey River and then follow that river inland to its junction with the Oakover and his waiting men. A longer, but safer route. Canning declined. He would return the way he had come.

While the Wallal man expressed surprise at this decision, he is reported to have said Canning's aura of confidence convinced him that Canning was quite capable of completing any journey he chose to undertake.

With the fence route reconnoitred, Canning returned to Wiluna district to begin a survey to locate it. Encumbered with a surveying assignment and the extra personnel required to carry out this task, Canning now had a new source of problems – a team of men - while battling the same hostile environment. When the survey finished at Cape Karaudren, the length of surveyed fence line, from its starting point on the Great Australian Bight, totalled 1175 miles. Canning also carried out 1200 miles of traversing to connect his fence line to existing surveys in the developed areas of Western Australia.

The construction of the fence was completed in 1906. Arguments still persist on how effectively it checked the spread of the rabbits west.

For many years the government employed men to patrol and maintain the fence. Theirs was a lonely job. They kept the fence clear of spinifex growth, ensured that the gates remained closed and repaired all breaks. They fought a losing battle.

The fence became the butt of many jokes. It prevented the rabbits from returning east. The rabbits queued at the gates waiting for the patrolman to come and let them through. If he was late the rabbits built their own styles over the fence.

The rabbits won. Kangaroos and emus, floods and fires continually damaged the fence - sometimes beyond repair. The patrols ceased. Nature had triumphed over man.

Maybe the fence significantly delayed the rabbits' advance in some areas. Maybe it didn't. But the fence, or its remains, survive. Many pastoralists maintain sections of it for their own use. In the north, the fence was a landmark and in the early years of the 20th century landmarks of this kind, in the north, were rare. I've no doubt many prospectors, drovers and explorers used the fence, and the track beside it, as a lifeline in the lonely country. Even Chud and myself, more than sixty years after its construction, positively identified our position on the map, when we passed through the rabbit-proof fence at the 672 mile post.

I ordered Chud to pose for a photo.

Pleasantly buoyant at the contact with Canning, the real purpose of our trip, Chud and I discussed the prospect of delivering the drum of fuel at Well 22 that evening. Then we saw two Land-Rovers heading down the track towards us. Chud pulled over onto a dry spot. We got out of our vehicle and stood beside it. The geologists stopped their vehicles in the centre of the track. One behind the other, and ambled up to us - one man from the front vehicle and two from the other.

"You won't get far," the leader told us. "It's still too wet. We've been getting stuck all the time. You get out of one bog then you get into the next. It's unreal out there."

"How far did you get?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. Forty or fifty miles maybe. We were in one bog for seven hours. You'd be mad to go on in that overloaded old thing."

He contemptuously nodded his head in the direction of our Land-Rover. Overloaded? Sure, and now very dirty as well but, none-the-less, our Land-Rover. I didn't like this bloke. I gained the impression that his two workmates didn't like him either. They remained about ten feet behind and did not attempt to support or contradict their leader at any stage. Strange.

"Why don't you come back with us?" the talkative one suggested. "We'll help you over the bad spots."

"Er ... not yet," I said.

"No," said Chud. "We'll push on for a few miles and see what it's like."

"Okay, whatever you reckon." Then, realising we were going on, he suddenly softened his line. "Of course, you may do better. It's probably dried out a lot since we were there."

The two silent men smiled. The leader stood awkwardly in front of us, not wanting the conversation to end but unable to prolong it.

"Well ... we'll be seen' yuh," I said and moved towards our Land-Rover.

The leader responded, suddenly in a hurry. "Yes, right. See yuh." He walked quickly to his vehicle and drove off. The other two followed.

"There's something funny going on there," I said to Chud. "I think those guys were playing no-talkies with each other." Chud agreed.

Whatever their troubles, the geologists served us well. We now had fresh tracks to guide us. Chud and I used their experience to our advantage. Where they had bogged in the track we detoured around. Where they had bogged on detours, we stayed on the track or added detours to their detours. In this manner we successfully negotiated several of the so-called horror stretches. Shortly after lunch we arrived at their seven-hour bog.

Seven hours was no exaggeration. Over one hundred feet of track, along with a few attempted detours, had been transformed into a soggy, filthy mess. Chud and I made an inspection.

The other party had stopped here overnight. We looked around their camp. Chud found a bunch of spinach and an apple. I found a jacking block and, strangest of all, two shovel blades in the camp fire ashes. Only the blades. It appeared that the handles had been burnt out of them.

"What's going on here?" I stared at the ash-covered shovel blades.

"The handles have been used to boil the billy," said Chud.

"Yes. I wonder what the hell was going on with those guys. Maybe the boss wanted to go on and the other jacked up on him and burned the shovels."

"Surely not," said Chud.

"Why else would they burn the shovels?"

Chud's only answer was to shake his head.

We had two good reasons to get beyond this bog. To achieve our purpose of heading east and to succeed in our "overloaded old thing" when the others had failed.

We conducted an extensive reconnaissance of the area surrounding the seven-hour bog and worked out a detour. We walked the length of our detour several times. I dug my heels into the earth as hard as I could. It is possible to locate soft ground by this method but sometimes the heel of the boot merely indents the crust of earth over a treacherous bog. The weight of a vehicle has no trouble breaking through the crust.

Our Land-Rover sank slightly a couple of times as Chud drove it around the seven-hour bog. On each occasion he carefully backed out and detoured further. The detour extended and became more of a by-pass. We eventually regained the track with the seven-hour terror now behind us.

We pressed on. But not for long.

No longer did we have the wheel tracks of the geologists' vehicles to guide us.

To the eye the road presented a clear, unbroken surface. But, at any moment, we knew the surface could crumble beneath us. Unlike the road between Ethel Creek and Balfour, there had been no consolidation of the surface by generations of traffic. It was beyond the station country. Beyond the reach of most tourists. It led to a place with the unflattering name of Windy Corner. At Windy Corner the track intersected a similar one which, in turn, joined others of the same description. These tracks are all part of the network established by Len Beadell in the late 50s and early 60s.

According to Beadell, the first track, the Gunbarrel Highway, was constructed to allow a geodetic survey to connect the Overland Telegraph Line to the surveyed areas in Western Australia. This road, and the others that followed, enabled Native Welfare personnel to make contact with groups of aborigines living in the Great Sandy Desert. Many people believe the roads were constructed to provide access to any rockets which may have faltered and crashed in the area after their launching from Woomera.

Beadell's roads provided the first basic network through this extensive area of desert. They are still used today. However, the infrequent but often heavy, desert rains have converted many to watercourses and today most travellers find it easier to drive beside the track than actually on it.

But most travellers do not venture into these areas in wet weather. Chud and I had no choice. Our fuel supply at Well 22 was essential. We had to continue east - even though the road was deteriorating.

We established a routine. I walked in front of the Land-Rover where the ground looked fragile. Progress was slow. We had a couple of narrow escapes. It was nerve-racking work.

We made camp early and discussed our position.

If we proceeded east our chances of becoming irretrievably bogged were good. What then? A wait until the ground dried out or a walk back to Balfour Downs for help. Help? We could not expect John to waste his time and risk his vehicle for the sake of a couple of tourists.

We decided to stay where we were for a few days and wait for the ground to dry out. We still had plenty of time. We could spare two or three, maybe even four, days. In that time the country would dry out and make travelling less hazardous and less nerve-racking than it was at present.

Once the decision was made I relaxed. The prospect of a few days, isolated here in the desert, appealed to me. A long weekend in the middle of nowhere. The sky was cloudless.

Yet again, I thought the rain was over. A few days of sunshine and making the fuel dump at Well 22 would be easy.

Knowing I could sleep in the next morning, I read late into the night. A little book called *A Hero of Our Own Time* by a Russian named Lermontov.

Although I enjoy reading books of travel and history when at home, once I am on the move myself, I like to read the classics. I never leave home without a supply of books. I get the titles from high school and university reading lists.

The appeal of travel and history books is primarily one of locality. The classic writers concentrate more on human reaction to locality and other humans. A more universal topic. In the classics I often find a precept set down long ago, on the other side of the world, by a person alien to myself, which strikes a chord with me, here and now - in Australia today. It's uncanny. I guess that is the hall mark of a classic.

What had I, in the Australian desert in 1968, in common with a Russian soldier in the Caucasus more than one hundred years ago?

Lermontov wrote, "... when we get right away from the conventions of society and close to nature we involuntarily become children once more. The soul sheds all that it has artificially acquired, to be what it was in its prime and probably will be again some day."

And I knew exactly what he meant.

I finished reading and turned off the light. With Chud snoring softly in his swag I felt quite alone. The cool, invigorating desert air, the majestic grandeur of the desert sky, the moonlight transforming the spinifex to spikes of silver. The wonder of it all caught my breath. My throat. My heart. My spirit. Not only the beauty of nature and the power of the universe, but the wonder of the written word and how it can bring all people together.

Now I was too excited to sleep. I turned the light back on and tried to write a letter to Stan. My thoughts were ecstatic with the emotion of life. Too ecstatic, too sublime, too intoxicating to translate into words on paper. I dropped the pen and returned to Lermontov. He understood.

"Anyone who, like myself, has wandered among the wild mountains, has feasted his eyes on their fantastic shapes, has eagerly inhaled the vivifying atmosphere of lofty passes - will readily understand why I long to reproduce these magical impressions."

Ah, how I long to reproduce these magical impressions.

Despite the late night, I woke early. I could hear a strange noise: a kind of guttural, gurgling sound. Chud was also awake and listening.

"What d'you reckon it is?" I asked.

"Buggered if I know. Camel maybe."

Camel! I was excited. While many wild camels roam free in the desert, I had never actually seen one. Both this year and last I had seen many tracks, some only a few hours old, but the elusive beasts had always managed to keep out of sight. Here was my chance to see one.

I signalled to Chud to be quiet and stay in his swag and I stealthily slipped out of my own. I took the binoculars from my port and peered around the back of the Land-Rover. There was no sign of a camel. Yet I could still hear the noise. I climbed onto the roof of the vehicle and looked further. Nothing. Not a movement anywhere. The spinifex and scrub was nowhere more than waist high. How could I miss a camel?

I raised the binoculars and began a systematic search of the area. I focussed on a distance about two hundred yards out and carefully moved the field of view through horizontal arcs of 90 degrees. As each sweep was closer than the last I slightly adjusted the focus after each sweep. If a camel was there, I would see it. Yes. There it was.

I distinguished the curve of a graceful neck, off-white in colour, moving between the clumps of spinifex.

"Yes Chud. It's a camel. A white one. Must be an albino. Yes, it's a beaut Chud, a beaut."

"You sure? An albino?" queried Chud.

"Yes, it's a beaut ... hold it ... I've lost it."

I looked above the binoculars. No more than a stone's throw away, my movements and exclamations had attracted the attention of a turkey (plains turkey or bustard). The bird immediately ran a few steps and then struggled ungainly into smooth flight. Chud, now leaning on his elbow in his swag, watched the bird disappear behind some trees. It was large but not at all camel-like. Chud began to laugh.

"It's a beaut. It's a beaut," he mimicked.

So to our day of rest in the desert. Chud rotated the wheels on the Land-Rover. I made him a cup of tea and continued reading my book. After lunch we walked forward along the track to see how it was drying out. After one dangerous section the track entered an area of sandridges and looked much safer.

We retraced our steps to the dangerous section and marked out some detours. Would you believe it, in the west, clouds were building up. Chud and I glared at them. By four o'clock they covered half the sky.

We dawdled back to the seven-hour bog to check if the geologist had left anything else we could use. There was no food there but, back at the Land-Rover, the turkey had returned. This time I saw it first. Chud got his rifle from the cabin of the Land-Rover, fired one good shot and we had fresh meat for tea.

Chud roasted the turkey in the camp oven. The bird was big and old. No doubt it had survived some poor seasons in the desert. Nevertheless, it tasted good. Not palatable by city standards perhaps, but even a Methuselah among turkeys tastes better than tinned meat.

As we each chewed a drumstick, Chud said, "You know, these things are protected. We could be fined for eating this bird. Keep your eyes open in case a cop comes along."

I was not afraid to speak with my mouth full.

"No. It's not the eating that's against the law. It's the shooting. I'm in the clear. You're the lawbreaker."

We enjoyed the meal but not the night. The cloud cover increased to completely cover the sky. I cursed the heavens and bedded down. I slept poorly. Each time I stirred, I looked for stars. I found very few. Worse still, I felt rain on my face. Light rain, but rain. How could the country dry out?

In the morning the sky was overcast. There was no rain on the horizon and the air was cool. We soon decided to give away the waiting game and continue our journey east. The carefully judged decision to wait - arrived at after sober thought only one day ago - was quickly abandoned in the face of a few raindrops.

Chud said, "Let's go on. It's just as likely to get wetter as drier."

The detours we planned the previous day were good solid ones. We entered the sandridge country and made good progress. We came to the western edge of the McKay Range. The range is south of the track but

numerous streams flow out of it and across the track. The crossings were risky. We bogged, then pushed our way through another two and rushed over another three. How long would our luck last?

I estimated our position 30 miles short of Well 22.

"Close enough," I suggested to Chud. "Let's leave the drum here. It's close enough to the stock route. What d'you reckon?"

Chud rested his forehead on the steering wheel. He loves driving but the pressure of this trip was getting to him. He offered no argument. We rolled the obnoxious drum of petrol out of the Land-Rover and hid it among some saplings - Fuel Dump No. 1 was established.

We repacked the gear, with the tucker-box back inside. The vehicle's load was a good deal lighter. We felt unburdened, carefree.

As we had made it this far out in an overloaded vehicle, we assumed the return trip - with a lighter load and our outward tracks to guide us - would be easy. Unlike most of our assumptions, this one proved to be correct. We drove around the seven-hour bog at dusk. The sky was clear. A cool breeze blew from central Australia - the true winter pattern of desert weather. However, I no longer dared hope the rain was over.

While Balfour Downs was the eastern-most occupied homestead in this area, there was another, Talawana, on this track. Talawana is abandoned. Abandoned to a far greater degree than Talga. With time to spare, we drove down a side road to check it out.

The country was in good condition. Parakeelya pastures flourished. Sadly, no stock were present to take advantage of the good feed. We came to the old homestead. An abandoned homestead on the edge of the desert is a melancholy place. I looked around for souvenirs and found only pathetic evidence of human occupation.

I picked up a wheel from an old Singer sewing machine - the pedal model. I found assorted pieces of metal, a decaying tea-chest containing the disintegrated remains of a golliwog. A rusty tank had collapsed into a rotting tankstand. An old meat-safe lay beside it. The frayed canvas of a deck chair flapped feebly by the front door. Rank weeds were consuming it all.

The traces of human activity forced me to think of the people who had lived here. Who worked here. Who probably struggled here. Who may have been happy here. Who held hopes of improving the place. Of making a home. Of making a fortune, maybe. All come to scraps of trivia disappearing into the lush growth of a good season.

What happened? What caused the people to leave? Were the seasons bad? Did a creditor foreclose? Did the desert break a marriage? Was the call of the city or town too strong? Here was a story but no person to tell it. Too poignant to contemplate.

The toilet, a short distance from the house, had no walls. The seat cover was also missing. The throne, exposed but defiant, remained. Chud

likes funny photographs.

"Here," I said. "I'll sit on it and go red in the face. Take a picture of me. You can call it "Relief at Talawana."

"Yes. Good idea," said Chud.

Balfour Downs homestead offered superior plumbing facilities. A bath. Most pioneer homesteads settle for a shower, but John and Meg allowed themselves the luxury of a bath. On our way through, they had invited us to overnight on our way back and take advantage of their ablution block.

In true swagman tradition, Chud and I drove up to Balfour late in the afternoon - in time for the evening meal. We were not the only callers. A dogger and his wife were drinking tea with John and Meg when we arrived.

"Oo, I'm cranky," said Meg. "Months go by and we never see anyone and now, for this night, we have four visitors."

The six of us crowded around the wooden table in the small kitchen. John's shy sons, Neddles and Bimbles, of pre-school age, clung to their parents in the presence of strangers.

"What did you two guys say to those geologists?" John asked.

"Nothing much," said Chud. "They were on their way back when we saw them. We just asked them about the track. Why?"

"Well, they asked me if you were government men checking up on them. Making sure they were not prospecting outside their lease. You had them really worried."

I looked at Chud in disbelief.

"We asked them how far out they'd gone. But only to get an idea of how far we could get," I said.

I told John about the burnt out shovels and my suspicion that all was not well in their camp.

"I don't think they were speaking to each other when they passed through here," said John.

"Anyhow," said Chud, "we enjoyed the spinach and an apple they left behind. I didn't expect to find fresh fruit and vegetables out there."

"Yes, and we had fresh meat too. My mate here shot a turkey," I added.

The dogger, Amos, then spoke: "You mean an emu, not a turkey."

He looked serious.

"No," I insisted, "a turkey. Plains turkey or bustard. That's their proper name."

"I know their proper name. But what your friend shot was an emu," said Amos.

I looked to the dogger's wife for an explanation. She smiled at me, blandly. Then looked at her husband.

"Right, so it was an emu that you shot," Amos repeated.

"No ..." I was about to start again, when John raised his hand.

"My friend," he said to me. "Amos is not only a dogger. He is also a game warden in this region. One of a game warden's duties is to take action against persons who destroy protected wildlife."

"Oh," I said. "Er ... oh."

Chud came to my rescue. "Wait on, it wasn't an emu or a turkey. It was an albino camel."

Amos laughed. "An albino camel. That's a good one. I haven't heard it called that before. An albino camel, eh?"

I, happily, allowed the matter to drop.

Amos and his wife were camped a few miles down the road. They refused Meg's offer to stay for tea. Meg insisted but they were adamant. I felt awkward. It was obvious that the dogger and his wife did not want to stay because Chud and I were there. Two extras were enough. No doubt Meg would have preferred some female conversation to that which Chud and I had to offer.

Actually John did most of the talking. He showed us over his workshop. His tools, his prized possessions, were individually wrapped in oil rags. He outlined the history of the mining industry in Western Australia: from Paddy Hannan to Tom Price. He knew every person that Chud and I had met in the north-west, along with an anecdote and observation on each.

After tea Chud and I washed the dishes. Meg retired to write letters - we would post them for her the next day. John continued to speak with an account of his involvement in the pastoral industry. I asked how long Talawana had been abandoned. An hour later I knew the entire history of the Talawana lease.

However, the story I liked most was the one John told concerning his courtship of Meg. Of all the many things he had done and seen in his life, I could see that this was the part he treasured most. The events of the story were interesting, but it was the sensitive manner in which he told the story and the unashamedly tender way he spoke of his wife that appealed to me. I have long forgotten the events of the story and yet the manner of telling I still remember quite clearly.

My bathwater was cold when I finally reached it. I slept well and woke with the young children looking at me, lying in the swag.

"Hullo Neddles. Hullo Bimbles," I said.

They raised their fingers to their mouths and ran off.

We thanked John and Meg for the hospitality and entertainment we had enjoyed and left Balfour Downs.



Chud at the rabbit-proof fence



Waiting for the country to dry out

CHAPTER 7

Balfour to Wiluna

"Well," said Chud, "today is Sunday. Noel won't be in Meeka till Tuesday or Wednesday. We've got time to go to Wittenoom and see some of that gorge country. What d'you reckon?"

"Sure," I said.

The drive into Wittenoom was impressive. The road runs parallel to the Hamersley Ranges. The hills of this range displayed soft hues of green, brown and blue and the folds in the hills looked almost symmetrical. *Women's Weekly* centre-fold country. The town of Wittenoom was no match for the natural splendour of its setting.

Only a couple of shops were open and they were understaffed. Chud picked up a tourist brochure and a shop attendant asked him for forty cents.

We took the road out to Wittenoom Gorge. Many streams, often spectacular ones, flowed out of the ranges but I could not identify a specific site as Wittenoom Gorge. I didn't know where to take a photo from. An old asbestos mine stood stark and grotesque in the picturesque surroundings. Chud and I agreed that the Wittenoom rubbish dump was the major tourist attraction of the area.

The dump covered a couple of acres. We fossicked around, not looking for anything in particular. I enjoy rubbish dumps, but they hold a magnetic fascination for Chud. The chance of finding something of value appeals to him and now, with the Land-Rover already well-laden, Chud ruefully lamented:

"Gee, there's a lot of good stuff here I could use."

He could not resist two odd shaped pieces of metal.

"What d'you want those for?" I asked

"These are good pieces of angle iron, mate. They might come in handy on the stock route," Chud answered in an authoritative tone. I picked up an old golf ball and slipped it into my pocket - to match his angle iron.

The sun goes down early in gorge country. We camped beside water in an idyllic setting and, unlike most idyllic camping sites, we had this one to ourselves. We ate the last of the desert turkey, or albino camel, as Chud persisted in calling it. Snug inside my swag I was enjoying listening to a breeze stirring the branches of the gumtrees, when another noise intruded. Raindrops falling on my swag-cover. I could no longer hear the breeze - only the rain. I slept poorly.

"Rain can dampen the enthusiasm of the keenest camper," declared Chud as we packed out wet gear and ate a cold breakfast the next morning. Back in Wittenoom "town" we waited for the shops to open. I don't know why we bothered. The range of luxury foods was small. I bought only Sao biscuits,

chewing gum and Life-savers.

The rain fell heavily. However, we were determined to visit some of the tourist attractions of the area. Dale's Gorge was our first choice. We travelled through the Hamersley Ranges to the Dale's Gorge turn-off. About 200 feet down this track we came to a boggy patch. We lost interest in Dale's Gorge. We back-tracked to the main road and took the turn-off to Joffre Falls - our second choice. This time we were more successful. We travelled ten miles along the track before meeting another bog which induced us to turn back.

So much for the Hamersleys. We retreated to the North-West Highway. On the way we amused ourselves by cursing the Hamersleys, Lang Hancock - the local iron baron - and the rain. We offered a variety of suggestions as to what those three could do with each other in a series of highly unlikely manipulations.

The heavy rain prevented us stopping for lunch. We ate the Saos, sucked the Life-savers and then chewed the gum. A high wind now accompanied the heavy rain. In the darkness of late afternoon Chud switched on the headlights.

"Is this a cyclone or just a low trying to be a cyclone?" he asked.

"It's hopeless," I said. "Let's stop at Mundiwindi for the night. There'll be a roadhouse or something there."

"I guess so," said Chud.

There wasn't. We drove into Mundiwindi at six o'clock. The rain had not eased. The wind splattered it fiercely against the windscreen. I saw lights in the windows of the houses and imagined the secure comforts of those within. A warm fire. A cooked meal. Mum and Dad. Brothers and sisters. Home is a good place to be on a wet and windy night.

"We don't cater for stop-overs here, mate," a surly bowser attendant informed me.

"I can see that," I answered. He was not amused. Neither was I. This was no weather to be out in. This was no holiday. Halls Creek? Where was that?

Disconsolate, I waited for the petrol tank to fill, afraid to attempt any further conversation. Coming from the south, another vehicle pulled into the garage. It stopped on the other side of the bowser - a beat up, mud-spattered Holden utility. I looked again. Without a windscreen. Three young men wearing raincoats and wet woollen beanies got out. They began sparring with each other to get warm. A blue cattle dog jumped down from the back of the 'ute and vigorously shook himself.

"Hey, Slim," one of the young men accosted the over-weight bowser attendant, "how long's it been rainin'?"

"All day."

"Thanks buddy. Fill her up will you? We wanna make Marble Bar by dawn tomorrow."

The bowser attendant remained unmoved. He frowned at the cattle dog as

it expectantly sniffed the steps of the garage.

The young men looked over our Land-Rover. They noticed the Australian Capital Territory number plate.

"What, you blokes from Canberra? Is it raining there too?"

I could not resist their playful mood.

"Dunno. We left there a while ago. Probably is. This rain looks pretty widespread."

This proof that "there is always someone worse off than yourself" had considerably improved my state of mind when I got back into our water-proof Land-Rover. I no longer envied the occupants of the Mundiwindi houses. A teenage ringer appeared out of the liquid gloom. Could we give him a lift south?

"We're only going as far as Meeka."

"That'll do. I'll catch a train from there."

The extra company in the cabin of the vehicle enlivened and varied the conversation. The youngster had a cheque - a big one. He also had a girl in Perth. He told us about them both. The miles rolled by and, although the rain eased, we drove through some alarmingly long stretches of water. We came to Kumarina, a roadhouse, about 150 miles north of Meekatharra.

After the hours of rain and dark, the activity at Kumarina overwhelmed us. A cluster of haphazardly parked transports, caravans and cars. High, overhead lights illuminated large areas of glistening mud and puddles. The steady murmur of men's voices, occasionally rising to a roar, remained secondary to the loud blare of a juke-box sending its message out, into the darkness, and beyond.

"They crossed the Yukon River and found the bonanza gold, below that old white mountain, just a little south-east of Nome."

Good old Johnny Horton. A man who knew how to sing a song.

Chud slowed down and steered into the activity, the light and the noise.

"I don't know. Will we give it a try? It looks pretty crowded," he said.

"Crowded," I repeated. "The place is bursting. But listen to that music. Let's stay."

Many patriotic Australians lament the way in which Australians wholeheartedly accept American country music as their own. I do not see it as a cause for lamentation. It is not the Americanisms of the songs that Australians feel an affinity for, but the inherent spirit of the music. The frontier, men against the land, high adventure, romance - call it what you will. It is the spirit expressed in so many American songs, that Australians recognise as a part of the Australian legend.

Nome, Yukon River, "the old white mountain" are not visualised or imagined by an Australian singing or listening to *North to Alaska*. These words

set a tone. They are "tough" lyrics and, along with the lilting tune and steady beat, they combine to produce the spirit of the song. A song of man. Man in a universal sense, not a nationalistic one.

Chud, the young ringer and myself walked into the Kumarina bar to Johnny Horton's welcome. The room was crowded. Two barmen were very busy. The cigarette smoke stung my eyes. The smell of men - dirty, drink-affected men - competed with the tobacco as the dominant odour.

As we entered, we were noticed but not perused or judged.

In the town pubs the regulars carefully observe each stranger, but in this bar the strangers were the regulars. There were no locals. We were all men of the road. All transients. All fellow-travellers. It was our pub. Our dirty, wet and windswept appearance identified us. I felt at home. The beer tasted good.

Chud located the publican. He was also a busy man - but friendly.

"Look boys, just roll out your swags on the verandah. Use the showers. I'm not charging anyone I can't put you in a room."

I slept well. Sure there was loud singing, arguing, even a few punches thrown, and men were stepping over my swag all night. But I slept well. I was tired.

With the morning, came bad news. A local radio broadcast classified all roads in the area as closed. A man I spoke to in the bathroom said:

"Well, nobody's goin' anywhere today, eh?"

Most of the men at Kumarina happily accepted the ruling. Most were north-bound and travel in that direction, we knew, did present problems. However, to the south lay a bitumen road, leading to Meekatharra. But all roads were officially closed. The police would pull up anyone using them.

Once again, the publican proved a friend.

"This is what you do boys. Go. Go south. Take it slowly. You don't have much dirt road before you hit the bitumen. If you meet any cops you tell 'em you drove most of the night and slept in the Rover on the side of the road after you passed through here. Then you can simply say you never heard the road was closed. They'll let you go on to Meeka."

He was a good bloke, the Kumarina publican. In circumstances like this, most publicans recommend caution. They will frighten you with stories of how dangerous it is to travel. They know that if you stay, you will probably spend money at their establishment. This publican was different. He was genuinely helpful.

I had noticed him earlier. With his wife, he was frantically preparing breakfasts for the large gathering of hungry men. They still charged the normal price. There was no attempt to take advantage of the bad weather and the plight of the stranded travellers.

I doubt that publicans of this type ever amass a fortune. They rarely save enough to buy or lease premises in a more populated area. They invariably work very hard for a few years and then return to town or city to

work for wages. I would like to think that such publicans are in some way compensated for the money they could have made (with only a little exploitation).

On our trip down from Kumarina we saw no traffic - police or otherwise. We drove into Meekatharra at lunchtime. After eating a steak and egg meal with our hitchhiker, we delivered him to the southern edge of town. He wanted to try for another lift before resorting to rail travel.

There is a Flying Doctor base at Meekatharra and Glen-Ayle is on their schedule. We called in. The man in charge knew of us.

"So you're the Canning Tourists. A telegram about you guys went through a few days ago. Hang on and I'll look it up."

We hung on.

"Here it is. From Henry Ward at Glen-Ayle to Frank Welsh at Yarrie and it reads, 'Do you know the whereabouts of the Canning Tourists?' "

We laughed and asked if there was any other news from GlenAyle.

"No. Nothing. Except that they had 117 points of rain out there over the weekend."

We did not laugh.

Down at the town's football oval, we cleaned out the Land- Rover. Then we booked into the Royal Mail Hotel for the night. After tea I walked up to the post office and rang home.

My Dad answered. Everyone was fine.

"How are Manly going?" I asked.

"Well, they got beaten by Parra yesterday. Everyone says they'll fade."

Yes, but where are they on the competition ladder?"

"Oh, they're still on top. But you know Manly - April Premiers."

"Come off it Dad. This is July we're in now." I could hear my father laughing. "Is Stan there?" I demanded.

"No," he said. "He's gone to the movies. Here's your mother."

My mother's hearing is not good at the best of times. At this time she had a cold. The line was not a good one. We did not communicate very well.

I tend to rush telephone conversations. I often make ambiguous statements and forget to give the most important messages. My mother, who is not usually expecting my calls, often gives me detailed information on the weather or news in the lives of her friends and neighbours. Neither of these subjects interest me a great deal.

I prefer letter writing. On paper, thoughts can be expressed at a more leisurely pace and so can be expressed more clearly. Sections may be crossed out or inserted and one has the convenience of any number of P.S. to fall back on.

I like to hear the familiar family voices, but I prefer to leave the important messages to mail. On this occasion I was disappointed that Stan was

not home. Manly on top - in July.

Noel breezed into town the next morning - like a breath of fresh air. He rubbed his hands together at the prospect of driving the Canning. Confidence and good humour exuded from his moderately portly frame.

Chud and I proceeded to worry him out of his effervescent mood with tales of bogs and rain in the desert. Noel supported our plan of action: to carry on regardless and see how far we could get.

Having worked with Noel the previous year, Chud knew him better than I did. My only contact with Noel had been brief meetings in Marble Bar and Perth. I had no doubt that he was the right man to come with us - indeed, it was more a case of Chud and I needing Noel. Although I did not know him well, I knew I soon would and, what is more, I was sure I would like him. However, friendship cannot be rushed. I find it impossible to slip into a "first name" relationship immediately. It was a couple of days before I could converse naturally and intimately with Noel. I felt awkward during this period but, for me, the basis of a good friendship is an initial period of reserve.

Noel showed us the portable Traegar transceiver - an essential part of our equipment on the Canning Stock Route.

Traegar is a household word in the land beyond telephone lines. Alfred Herman Traegar grew up on a farm near Balaclava, South Australia, where he soon realised his vocation. At the age of 12 he established a primitive telephone link from his parents' farmhouse to their machinery shed. He qualified as an electrical engineer and, in 1926, joined John Flynn in Central Australia. When Traegar built his pedal radio, Flynn's "Mantle of Safety" became a reality. The successful invention came only after several failures. Traegar displayed tenacity of purpose as well as technical know-how.

I acknowledge Flynn as a great man. A man of vision who brought grand ideas to fruition. However, all such men of ideas are dependent on technical experts. Men who deal in nuts and bolts. Men who do the actual work that transforms an idea into a reality. Flynn's success owes a great deal to Traegar.

Unfortunately, our portable Traegar was not fitted with coils of the Meekatharra base's frequency. We had planned to keep in touch with Meekatharra as we travelled the southern section of the stock route. Now we would have no radio contact until we came within the range of the base at Port Hedland - at about Well 20. On the northern section of the Canning Stock Route, we would use the Flying Doctor base at Derby.

Chud, Noel and myself prepared a grocery order and left it at the local store. Noel instigated a move to have three beers. "Ceremonials" Chud called them. We each ate a big steak at the cafe. I played the juke-box. There was a good range of Slim Dusty numbers. We collected our groceries and I sent a telegram to Glen-Ayle, advising them we were on our way.

There were no distractions on the hundred-plus miles that separate Meekatharra from Wiluna. I kept one eye on Noel's vehicle behind us. I would come to know the face of his Land-Rover very well in the next few weeks. No longer was it Chud and me. No. Now we were three. "In convoy," told Chud.

Wiluna is an historic old town.

A surveyor, L.A. Wells, located the town site in 1892. Four years later gold was found at Lake Way about 20 miles distant. The initial rush lasted until 1908. By that year all the gold that could be easily extracted by the diggers was gone.

In the early 1930s an influx of the capital required to set up more expensive mining equipment changed Wiluna from an old mining town to a busy company mining town. In 1931, with the Great Depression on the land, Wiluna was a thriving community. Thousands of unemployed men flocked to the town. The Meekatharra-Wiluna rail link was opened in 1931. Wiluna was still busy during the war with arsenic, antimony, copper, silver and nickel also mined. Improved transport facilities and advanced methods of metallurgy made Wiluna an important town. However, towards the end of the war the town began to decline.

As we drove through the deserted streets, I noticed that most of the shops were empty. Most looked as if this condition was permanent rather than temporary. Some of the hoardings displayed the old spelling for the town: Weeloona. This name appears more authentic in the light of a popular explanation of the origin of the town's name. "Wee-loo" is the call of the southern stone curlew, which favours the area, and "na" is aboriginal for "place." Hence Weeloona. A presumptuous mining warden is blamed for changing the attractive Weeloona to the mundane, Anglo-Saxon Wiluna,

I sought out the local policeman and asked him about the condition of the Glen-Ayle road.

He said, "They've had an inch and a half of rain out there. I won't be going anywhere for at least a month."

Any traveller who gets into difficulty in the bush becomes the responsibility of the police. They often have to organise a rescue party. Naturally, the police try and discourage travellers from going on if conditions are dangerous. I believe that some policemen convince themselves that conditions are worse than they really are in order to have an excuse for delaying making their patrols. We took these facts into consideration and decided to ignore the advice of the arm of the law in Wiluna.

No doubt the policeman thought my interest was in the main road to Glen-Ayle from Wiluna. We did not intend to follow this road. It does not follow the Canning Stock Route. The stock-route lies west of the main road, in station country. Sometimes there is a track, sometimes not. Creeks and lakes there definitely are.

Noel said, "That dumb copper would have a fit if he knew which way we wanted to go to Glen-Ayle. Just as well he doesn't or he'd probably tell us not to leave town."

Noel worked in Wiluna during his youth and knew some of the local identities. They called him Tommy. An aunt cooked for the hotel so we booked in for tea. "A few beers first," said Noel.

It was, after all, Wiluna, the bottom of the Canning Stock Route, our starting point. However, after the policeman's pessimistic outlook, we decided to keep quiet about our intention to drive the stock route - starting today.

We fronted the bar for ceremonials. The bar was a big one. Several small groups of drinkers eyed us suspiciously. The policeman came in and joined one of the groups. He spoke softly, furtively, to his mates. No doubt he told them about us. They looked at us again. We felt like outcasts.

I stood with my back to the door, so I did not see the publican come in. The same publican, Barney, who, last year, had considered me in need of psychiatric help because I wanted to come back to the desert. Barney must have recognised my back. The first indication I had of his presence was hearing a loud, throat-clearing cough. I turned around and met his eye.

"Well, look who it is. I thought you were joking when you said you'd be back to drive the Canning. Now I see you were fair dinkum." Barney spoke loudly enough for the entire bar to hear.

All the drinkers, including the policeman, looked at us yet again - now with honest interest, even respect. The publican's approval ensured the approval of his patrons. It was the kind of encouragement we needed. Barney did not speak of rain, wet tracks, getting bogged or turning back. Barney, who I had judged as reticent, positively sour, in the previous year was now friendly and enthusiastic about our trip.

I gave him my standard line, "Halls Creek is a long way up from here, you know."

"That's true, but you've been in that country before. You know what it's like. You've already come halfway around Australia to get here. Canning's route's not likely to worry you guys," Barney replied.

Even the policeman appeared impressed. Good old Barney.

We enjoyed our meal in the hotel. The style of service was informal. Diners queued at the kitchen stove with their plates. The cook ladled out the food and the diner then took a place at the table. The cook sat beside the stove and encouraged us to accept returns. I ate a very large meal.

After the meal, outside the hotel, with Barney's words still fresh in my mind, I climbed into the Land-Rover. Chud started the motor. It sounded good. He switched on the headlights. We headed north out of Wiluna - along the Canning Stock Route.

Our headlights made moving, grotesque shadows with the scrub on either side of the road. Noel's lights occasionally flashed brightly in a rear-vision

mirror. This was it. We were on our way. No official farewell or civic function. No toasts or speeches with expressions of good luck and best wishes for success. Just three friends, only slightly drunk, driving out of town to look for somewhere to camp.

"That old Barney remembered you from last year. You said he hardly spoke to you. You must've told him something about our trip," said Chud.

"I don't recall saying too much to him," I answered. "Maybe Henry Ward's been talking to him. Anyway, he's a good old bloke, isn't he? At least he thinks we can do it."

Ah, Barney. How I appreciated his greeting in the Wiluna hotel that night. His confidence in us gave me confidence. I like to think he regarded our party in the same way the Wallal telegraph officer regarded Canning, when Canning told him of his intention to walk back into the desert. Barney believed we could drive the Canning. His opinion was reassuring. It gave me a good feeling. All the delays and troubles of the past weeks became nothing more than incidents of travel.

I savour Barney's words to this day. If our trip had a turning point, it was in the bar of the Wiluna hotel I when heard Barney say, "Now I see you were fair dinkum."

What better place to have a turning point - at the very commencement of the trip proper - Wiluna.



Hammersely Ranges



Street scene Wiluna

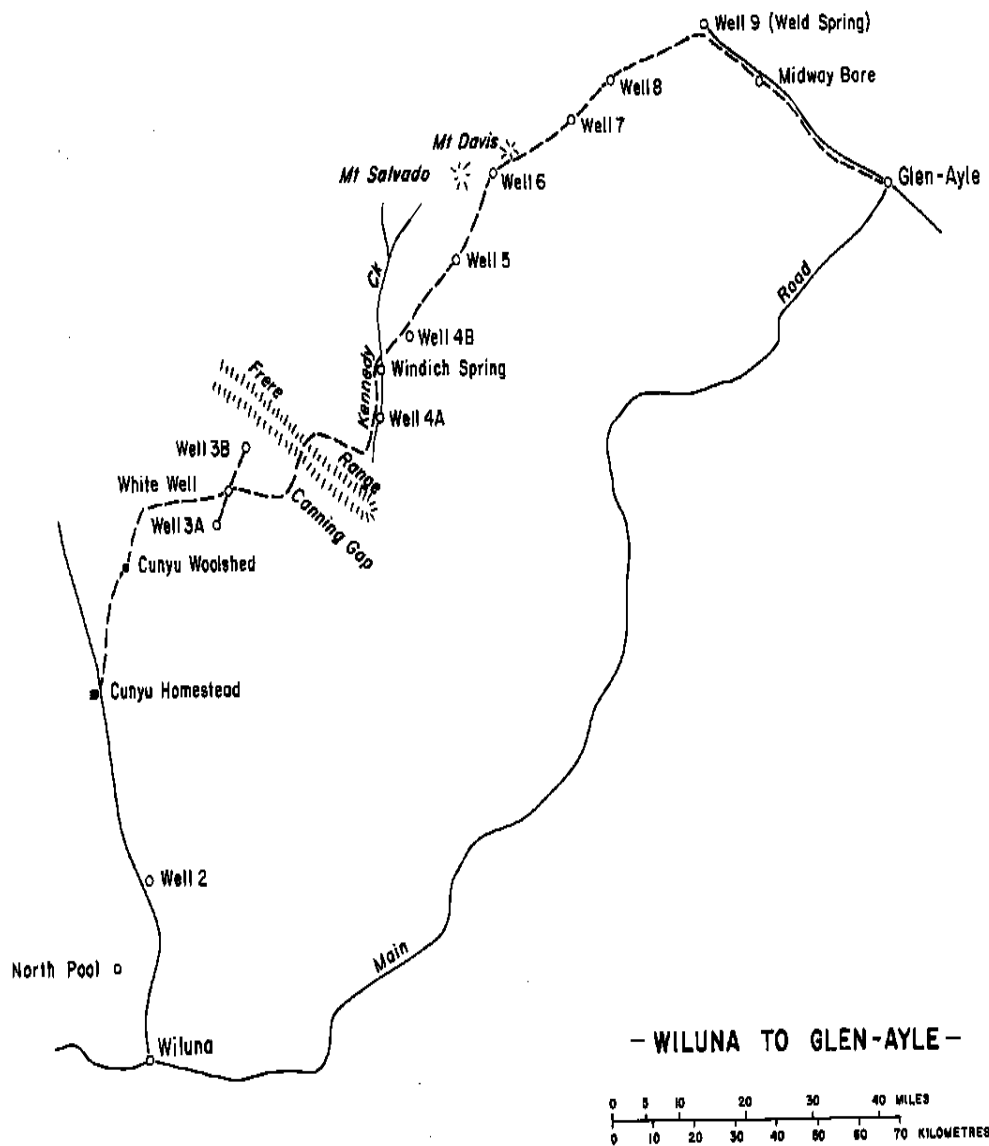
PART 2

THE TRIP

*Knowledge was never a matter of geography. Quite the reverse it
overflows all maps that exist.*

Patrick White - *Voss*

CHAPTER 8



CHAPTER 8

Wiluna to Glen-Ayle

We made camp beside the road about ten miles north of Wiluna. There was no moon. The surrounding mulga accentuated the darkness. The contrast between our camp site and the bright lights of the Wiluna hotel forced me to realise that we were finally on our way.

I felt subdued. By travelling the ten miles out of Wiluna, I had entered the world of the Canning Stock Route. The stock route was no comfortable corridor through the desert. It was a thread - tenuous and fragile - that we had to cling to in order to reach Halls Creek.

It was not fear of my own personal safety on the stock route that subdued me. Rather it was a consciousness that I was flaunting myself before nature's power to dare to cross this enormous desert. It reminded me of my early days of swimming. I knew I could swim a length of the pool, but standing at the shallow end with my feet on the bottom, I would suddenly feel insecure as I looked down to the deep end. There was so much water. The 55 yards of swimming held no terrors for me. I knew I could swim four times that distance. No. It was the solid mass of water that I was about to show such disrespect for by swimming that frightened me.

Similarly, the 1000 miles of the Canning Stock Route did not worry me. It was the magnitude of the desert, an enormous wonder of creation that I and my friends were daring to confront, that caused me to recognise my own human frailty.

Already, I had broken the 1000 miles into easy stages - like sections on a bus route. The first section, through station country to my friend Henry Ward at Glen-Ayle, would be easy.

Chud and Noel began talking about Land-Rovers. In my company, Chud had been starved for this, his favourite topic of conversation. Noel, keen and knowledgeable on the subject, provided Chud with all the discussion he required. I got into my swag and finished reading my Russian novel.

Peter Muir, the Desert Dogger, has made a comprehensive study of the Canning Stock Route wells on the station country immediately north of Wiluna. This, and the fact that we were anxious to be away from the main roads - away from people telling us "you'll never get through" - led us to bypass Canning's first waters, Well 1 and North Pool.

On our "Wiluna" 1:250 000 map, Well 2 was marked close to the road. While searching for a turn-off to it the next morning, Mr Green and his wife came by. Mr Green runs Cunyu Station on which the lower end of the stock route is located. He directed us to Well 2. He expressed doubt on our being able to cross Lake Nabberu between Wells 3 and 4. His wife was more

positive. She laughed.

"That lake'll be covered with water. You'll need a boat to cross it," she said.

We checked out Well 2. A windmill pumped water into a trough beside the well. It looked no different to thousands of other bores.

Well 2A, a tank in granite, between Wells 2 and 3, was well clear of the track. We decided to give it a miss. Well 3 was beside the track. We would make it our next stop. However, we found more tracks on the ground than were marked on our map. It was very confusing. Station tracks can slow down the best of navigators. After several false starts, back tracks and dead ends, I resorted to the reliable ploy of asking for directions. Chud drove on to the Cunyu homestead. A young girl answered my knock at the kitchen door.

"G'day. I'm trying to get to Lake Nabberu. I want to see how much water's in it. Can you help me?"

"Sure. Go that way." She pointed to a track bearing north. "Peel off to the right at the first mill you come to. It takes you to a woolshed. Keep going on the main drag and you'll come to White Well. It's about 20 miles past the woolshed. At the White Well take the left hand fork. It runs up to the lake."

Humbled in the face of such knowledge, I tentatively inquired, "Isn't the Canning Stock Route out that way?"

"Sure. If you take the right hand fork at the White Well, you'll soon come to one of the old wells. I've seen it myself."

I hurried back to the Land-Rover and plotted the talented girl's directions on my map. They fitted perfectly.

"Well?" said Chud.

"I think we should take that bird along as an extra navigator," I said.

Chud looked back at the trim figure standing behind the screen door.

"That's the smartest thing you've said today," he replied.

The directions proved accurate. As predicted we came to the woolshed, then White Well. We turned right and drove south to a fence corner shown on the map. "No 3 Govt Well" was marked nearby. We found the well surrounded by pools of water. It was old and fallen in - but authentic.

In the late afternoon we headed back to White Well. Chud drove up to a small damp gutter. The Land-Rover was in third gear. Chud tried to engage second. He couldn't. No amount of pushing, straining, swearing or praying made any difference. Chud could not force the gear lever into first or second positions. Noel came over and tried with the same result.

"What the hell's going on," said Chud. "Surely we haven't done the gearbox?"

Noel and I dared not answer.

"Let's camp here," I suggested.

So, on our first day on the stock route, the grand expedition, hopefully

the first to drive the entire stock route, we had located two wells (with directions from locals) and "done" a Land-Rover gearbox. Halls Creek seemed a long way off.

Neither Chud's nor Noel's knowledge of Land-Rovers extended to dismantling a gearbox in the bush. But we had to do something.

Regardless of the type of mechanism I am trying to repair - gramophone, cistern, lawn-mower or whatever - my method is the same. I disassemble as far as I am game and then reassemble. I claim a 75% success rate using this method. So Chud and I decided to dismantle the gearbox. Noel put the billy on.

None too confidently we started and as we progressed our confidence did not increase. We removed the cover of the gearbox. All the parts were so smooth and well-fitting. The fine lubricating oils gave the mechanism a shiny, new appearance. It seemed sacrilegious to interfere. Chud and I paused for a cup of tea.

A chilly wind began to blow. We squatted on the upwind side of the fire. The shield our bodies created in the wind brought the flames licking back towards us. Gripping the cup in both hands, I started to think of alternative plans.

We could tow the Land-Rover back to Wiluna, rail it to Perth and have the gearbox replaced. No time for the stock route then. We could head down to Albany. It sounded like an interesting town. We could go back east via the Nullabor. That would be a decent trip. Virtually around Australia.

"OK, let's get this gearbox back together." Chud's sad voice roused me from further planning.

As Chud lifted the small metal cover that housed the base of the gear lever, a small stone dropped out. A stone about the size of a pea. I picked it up.

"Where did this come from?" I asked.

Chud's eyes met mine. Neither of us expressed a hope but both of us were desperately hoping that this insignificant stone had caused the trouble. Noel stopped what he was doing at the tucker-box, but he was too experienced to offer a comment.

Chud took the stone from me. He fixed the gear lever back in position and slipped the stone under the cover on the left hand side. He could not engage first or second gears. He allowed himself a smile. I removed the stone and Chud tried again. First and second gears engaged smoothly. Chud tested the "repairs" thoroughly. First, second, third, top, third, second, first, second, first, second, third ...

I put my hand on his arm. "Hold it mate," I said, "I think you've found the trouble."

"You bet I have. Show me that bloody rock."

Chud abused the errant stone in a manner that a bullock driver would have

found hard to improve upon. But it was more an expression of relief than a conscientious effort at castigation.

"You'll be able to write an article for the Land-Rover Club journal about this," suggested Noel.

"Not in that kind of language, he won't," I said.

"I'm going to keep this little bastard," said Chud. He carefully placed the stone in his tool box. "Now, show me where this water-logged lake is." He reached over and unrolled our Nabberu map.

The next morning, with the Land-Rover gears functioning perfectly, we returned to White Well. A few miles further north we found Well 3A. It was old and authentic, but of more concern to us was the large pool of water around it. From this point I could see the Frere Range, only a few miles further north. However, between us and the range lay Lake Nabberu. The lake that Mrs Green told us would be covered with water.

The water surrounding Well 3A prevented any further progress north. We back-tracked and crossed the water-course on which the "3" wells and the White Well were located. The crossing led to a track. The track was dry but it headed east. We came to a turn-off on our left - heading north, the direction we wanted to go - towards the range. This track was also dry. It traversed scrubby country and then broke out onto a lake surface. Not a bare, white lake surface, but a pinkish brown lake, covered with low bushes. The surface was dry and safe.

"Is this track on your map?" asked Chud.

"No," I answered, "but we won't worry about a small detail like that. It's heading in the right direction. That's the main thing."

Ten minutes later we reached the solid gravelly slopes of the Frere Range. Chud stopped for me to check our position.

"When do we get to the flooded lake?" asked Noel.

"That was it," I replied, casually waving my arm in the direction we had come.

"Good," said Noel, "our luck's changing."

I decided we were at a break in the Frere Range marked on my map as Canning Gap. "We might as well stick with this track," I told Chud and Noel.

"OK, navigator," said Chud. I would have preferred him to have called me Russell.

A mile further on the track forked. I indicated to Chud to follow the left hand fork. This track branched into three. Conservatively, I chose the centre branch. It led us to what had once been a fine stand of trees. Only the stumps remained. We returned to the three ways and selected another branch. It led to the remains of another timber-gathering camp. Our third and final choice led to a set of yards - recently constructed and so, not on the map.

"Gee, I wish we'd get into the desert. Sandridges are much easier to find your way through than this stuff," I said.

I spread the map on the bonnet of the vehicle. The three of us glared at it accusingly.

Canning Gap was marked about 12 miles west of Kennedy Creek. Kennedy Creek, flowing towards the Frere Range from the north, contained Windich Spring: water 4A on Canning's chart. As Kennedy Creek was a major water-course, I suggested that we simply head east, not worrying about any tracks, until we came to the creek. Unable to offer an alternative, Chud and Noel agreed.

Without a track to bother me, the navigation became easier. There were no more decisions on which fork to take, no more conjecture on whether the track we had chosen was taking us in the right direction and no more wondering if the track was becoming more, or less, distinct. Yes, it was much easier to follow a compass bearing (in this case, east) and skirt around any obstacles in our path.

The ground was boggy in places and belts of thick scrub also slowed us down. After an hour's travel, I walked up a small rise and, a mile to the east, I could see the richer green and the denser foliage of trees associated with a water-course as definite as Kennedy Creek.

We arrived at the creek about four in the afternoon. I was relieved to find the water flowing south, confirming that it was indeed Kennedy Creek.

John Forrest named this creek after a police constable in his party. He explored the area in May 1874 while on his journey from Perth to the Overland Telegraph Line.

Forrest is one of Western Australia's favourite sons.

The significant role he played in the history of Australia extends from the inland exploration era to the early years of federation. The parochial West Australians revere him as the first of their locally born heroes to become a national figure.

Forrest's father was an engineer and came to the Swan River colony in 1842. John was born five years later. He was the third of nine boys. The extensive Forrest family lived on a 100 acre property on the Preston River.

Like Augustus Gregory, Forrest spent most of his childhood in the bush where he learnt about aborigines, convicts and the itinerant Australian worker. In later years Forrest admitted that Augustus Gregory was one of his boyhood heroes. This fact may have influenced Forrest to sign up with a government surveyor.

Forrest thrived on the work. He surveyed grants and roads throughout the colony and earned a reputation as a tough, capable bush surveyor.

This reputation gained him the command of an expedition sent out from Perth to search for Leichhardt and, in 1870, he made a journey around

the Great Australian Bight to Adelaide.

In the early 1870s Forrest worked in the northern districts of the Swan River colony. Here he became enamoured with the idea of leading a party from the headwaters of the Murchison River, east to the Overland Telegraph Line. Forrest proposed the expedition to the government and sought financial backing from local pastoralists. He suggested that he may find good grazing country on the way.

In August 1872, the government agreed to organise the finance to enable Forrest to make the expedition. However, at that time, he was required to carry out urgent survey work within the colony. I can imagine the interest with which Forrest followed the exploits of Giles, Gosse and Warburton while tied down to the comparative mundane surveying in the west.

However, his patience was rewarded and in March 1874, Forrest's west-to-east expedition left Perth. In two months the party travelled, via Geraldton, to the Kennedy Creek. No doubt Canning read Forrest's favourable description of this area and decided to incorporate it in his stock-route.

We camped beside Kennedy Creek, aware that we were now in the tracks of both Forrest and Canning. I read out their descriptions of the country. "Large clumps of white gums" and the "grassy country" of Forrest became "scrubby mulga country with patches of limestone, fair feed" under Canning.

We found Forrest's description the more accurate one. Forrest also reported seeing ducks and opossums. We saw no opossums, but the ducks caused Chud some concern.

Chud was a hunter. He owned a variety of fire-arms. He often related, proudly, the extensive list of species that had fallen to his bullets. Starting from rabbits, foxes and birds, he had graduated to dingoes, kangaroos, pigs, goats and donkeys before attaining a pinnacle of success, when he bagged a buffalo and a salt-water crocodile in Arnhem Land. I like to think Chud's contact with the desert turned his thoughts to conservation. Certainly, in 1968, he was no longer the terror to wildlife he had been a few years earlier. Nonetheless, the ducks of Kennedy Creek brought the conflicting forces of conservation and destruction, within Chud, into direct confrontation.

When we broke camp on Kennedy Creek, we had enough fresh meat to last us till we reached Glen-Ayle station. We did not need any ducks. In fact, the plucking and cleaning would have delayed us.

As we loaded the Land-Rovers large flocks of ducks flew above us. I noticed Chud look up each time the whirr of wings sounded overhead. His face displayed exasperation. With the vehicles almost ready the ducks flew lower and the wings whirred louder. Too loud for Chud. Acting under this extreme provocation, he reached into the cabin of his Land-Rover for his gun. Chud, the conservationist, made a supreme effort. With his hand on the weapon, he paused. Chud, the hunter, declared angrily:

"If those bloody things fly over once more, I'm gonna blast'em."

The ducks took heed. They did not fly over again.

We drove on to a well-marked "No. 4A Govt Well" on our Nabberu map. This well is not shown on Canning's chart. Canning's 4A is Windich Spring. We arrived at the spring mid-morning.

Forrest had named it after one of the aborigines in his party, Tommy Windich. To Forrest's credit, throughout his life and writings he took every opportunity to acknowledge the important part played by Windich, and another aboriginal guide, Tommy Pierre, in the success of his explorations.

Forrest refers to Windich as his "old and well-tried companion" which, in Forrest's taciturn official report, stands out as an eloquent expression of affection and respect. Windich Spring is a fitting tribute to the aborigine. The unusual name ensures that all visitors investigate its origin.

In 1967, at the end of the dry season, I saw barely half a mile of water, up to twenty yards wide, in Windich Spring.

Hardly enough water to swim in. The surrounding country was brown, dusty and cattle-stained - but the reeds grew green and tall in Windich.

And now, as we came to the spring at the end of the wet season, the whole area was green and park-like. The water flowed, audibly down the course of Kennedy Creek and we found several other pools away from the main channel.

Beyond Windich a track showed out clearly with the wells close by. After 4B we came to Well 5. The depth of this well is given by Canning as 104 feet 6 inches - the deepest well of the entire stock route.

Well 6, in a gully, was named Pierre Spring by Forrest. Having named a spring after Windich, Forrest gave an indication of the political acumen he was to show in later years and named the next substantial water after his other aboriginal guide. Forrest described Pierre Spring as "a diamond in the desert." A stand of tall white gums gave the well an attractive setting. The water was so clear I could see to the bottom - an indication of purity. However, on looking closer I noticed a rotting rib-cage in the water. I decided our vehicles already carried enough water to enable us to reach Glen-Ayle.

There are two prominent hills in the vicinity of Well 6. Both are on the north-west side of the stock route and are clearly visible for many miles.

The first to come into view was Mt Salvado. Forrest named this peak after Bishop Salvado, a Spanish missionary who, from his headquarters at New Norcia, sought to bring Christianity to the aborigines. He had helped sponsor Forrest's expedition. Mt Davis, closer to the stock-route, was also prominent. Davis was another contributor to the expedition fund.

Well 7 was in thick scrub beside the track and I almost missed seeing it. Well 8 was almost in the centre of the track and Chud had to swerve sharply to avoid colliding with it.

Between Wells 7 and 8 we negotiated our first sandridge. It was only a ripple compared to the giant waves of ridges we met later on. Successive generations of traffic had shaped a narrow cutting through its crest. Both of our vehicles crossed over without a gear change. However, I recall the shape and size of this first sandridge quite vividly.

Chud turned to me and said, "That's number one."

After the rush of landmarks we camped in high spirits. I continued to refer to Forrest's adventures of travel and descriptions of the country.

"I wonder what Forrest had for tea here?" said Noel.

He had punctured a tyre during the day's travel. After tea he repaired it. The economy of movement he displayed indicated that it was a job he knew well. With the tube patched and back inside the tyre, Noel worked to inflate it with his hand pump. He pumped hard for several minutes then joined Chud and myself beside the fire. He poured himself a cup of coffee.

"Well," he said, "I reckon that tube is about one third full of air."

In the morning we came to Well 9. Canning's men constructed the well on another spring discovered by Forrest. Forrest named the spring after Weld, the governor of Western Australia at the time. He described it as "one of the best springs in the colony."

A windmill pumped water from Well 9 and cattle had denuded the immediate area of grass. Surface water was limited to a few puddles among the ti-tree in the nearby creek bed. The main attraction at Weld Spring is Forrest's stone fort.

Aborigines attacked Forrest's party here and so the explorers built a fort. Forrest gives the dimensions of the fort as ten feet by nine feet by seven feet high. Time and souvenir hunters have reduced the height to three or four feet, but the fort can still be recognised from Forrest's description. It backs onto the creek and the front parapet faces a hill from which the aborigines attacked.

Other historic landmarks, less substantial than the stone fort have not survived. Forrest blazed "F 46" on a tree near the fort and Canning blazed a smaller tree between the fort and Forrest's tree. We could find no trace of Canning's tree. Part of Forrest's tree remains but, unfortunately, without the "F 46" blaze. It was removed in 1942.

In that year the army investigated the Canning Stock Route. In true military style, a troop of men and vehicles were allocated to do the job. However, late summer rains had flooded the area. The army, impatient for results, could wait no later than April before setting out. Under their leader, Captain A.E.R. Russell, the soldiers persevered in atrocious conditions and it was not until a few miles north of Well 11 that the order to retreat was given.

The captain, aware of the significance of the "F 46" blaze, removed it from the tree and transported it back to Perth. He handed it over to the Perth Museum.

Captain Russell suffered a good deal of criticism for his action. Many people believe the blaze should never have been removed from its original setting. They claim it lost all significance as soon as it was taken to the city.

Certainly, the blaze belonged at Weld Spring, but the total disappearance of the Canning tree and the damage suffered by the stone fort indicate that the Forrest blaze would not have survived for very long in these days of four-wheel drive tourists.

Forrest used the Weld Spring as a base while he searched east and north-east for his next water supply. He experienced some difficulty and did not finally quit the spring until the eighteenth day after he first found it. This was the longest delay Forrest had to bear in the entire journey from Perth to the Overland Telegraph Line.

Forrest's route was followed by later parties using camels. The camel men claimed that Forrest was very fortunate to have made his crossing (with horses) in a good season. Many of the waters that sustained his party were found dry by the later travellers.

He may have been lucky. But Forrest was a brave explorer and so was entitled to be favoured by fortune. His method of exploring was not as conservative or safety conscious as that of Giles, Gosse and Warburton. Forrest was prepared to move his entire party before locating the next water. A forward party, usually Tommy Windich and himself, would leave the main party and go ahead to look for water. The main party would follow along in the forward party's tracks. When the forward party located water, or decided to camp without, they would return to the main party and guide them to the chosen camp site.

Although this method proved successful in Forrest's exploring venture, I doubt he could have successfully carried the same daring approach into the world of politics. Whether he modified or totally abandoned his front-on style to become a successful public servant and politician would entail research into matters that hold no interest for me.

Forrest's journal gives little insight to his character or emotions. However, his behaviour during his visit to Melbourne, late in 1874, shows that he had a real feeling for Australian history. While travelling through the streets of the city in a carriage he caught sight of the Burke and Wills monument. He stopped the carriage and walked over to make a close inspection of the memorial. He later wrote:

"Several times afterwards during my stay in Melbourne I went to look at this monument, and it always sent a thrill through my very soul."

At Weld Spring (now Well 9), Forrest's and Canning's routes diverge. In 1874 Forrest headed east to the Red Centre. Canning, in 1906, continued north-east to the Kimberleys. In 1968, Chud, Noel and myself followed a track south-east to Glen-Ayle Station.

During 1967 my survey party had established a base camp beside this track near Midway bore - ten miles from Well 9 and twenty miles from Glen-Ayle. I led Chud and Noel through the scrub to show them the old camp site.

I found the sweet sadness of nostalgia quite overpowering as I wandered around the familiar area.

"This is where we had the mess tent. My tent was over here. From my bed I looked out over that spinifex landscape. See that tree? That's where we hung the shower. And those ashes show where the copper was."

Chud and Noel maintained a respectful silence as I conducted the tour. They drifted back to the vehicles as I continued to reconstruct the old camp and re-live the events of the previous year.

In the long grass I tripped over the remains of a broken Land-Rover spring. It lay near a few square yards of concrete the mechanic had laid down as a floor for his workshop. I remembered the day we broke that spring. It had been a rough ride back to camp. I recalled other accidents that befell us at the camp. The mechanic burning his legs, trouble among the men, a shortage of supplies, a mistake in the survey work. I was back in last year's camp.

I heard the silence of the bush broken by the men discussing the merits and faults of the Land-Rovers and their own driving abilities. I heard the clatter of plates from the mess tent. Our Pommy cook's "come and get it" strangely out of place in the mulga. I could smell his apple pies. Slim Whitman was singing *North Wind* and *China Doll*. I hunted up and down the radio dial to hear tracks from a new Beatles album *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Slim Dusty's new song was *Since Then*. A Henry Lawson poem. I lay in my sweat reading. Marvelling at the wisdom of Samuel Butler as I read his book *The Way of All Flesh*. Old Samuel told me that the secret of life was to successfully adapt to changes of circumstances.

Good times. I had been happy here.

My reverie slipped back further to identify how I felt now. A movie, *Twelve O'clock High*, which I had seen when I was a schoolboy coming to grips with the mysteries of life at the local picture theatre - every Saturday afternoon.

Twelve O'clock High. Dean Jagger, a sympathetic actor, returns to an airfield in Britain. He was based at the airfield during the war. On his return he finds that the field is no longer in use. He leaves his car and walks across to the edge of the tarmac, lost in thought. He hears the engines of aeroplanes. He sees the wings flash overhead. He recalls his old friends and their adventures. He re-lives.

And when it's over he looks down at his feet. The tarmac of the airfield, like the mechanic's floor and my broken spring, is disappearing beneath the grass. Resumed by vegetation. Despite all that happened, that was so important and so dynamic at the time: all the trials and tribulations, all the good and bad

times, the successes and the failures. Yes, despite everything that happened here, to us, very little tangible evidence of our presence remains. Evidence of human occupation soon disappears.

"C'mon. Let's get on down to Glen-Ayle. I want to meet this Henry Ward of yours," called Chud.



At Well 3A



At Windich Spring 1967



Mount Davis



Pierre Spring 1967 - a diamond in the desert 1967



Well 9 in 1967

CHAPTER 9

Glen-Ayle

Henry was standing by to open the gate when we reached Glen-Ayle.

"How are you, Russ?" His giant hand swallowed my own. I introduced Chud and Noel. We all moved to the back porch which, favoured by the winter sun, was the smoko area. Mrs Ward came from the kitchen. Tinga and Lou, teenage Wards, joined us for tea and scones with Vegemite.

Growlie paraded herself before us. She was only a small dog but her colour indicated some blue cattle-dog ancestry. Although friendly and affectionate, Growlie maintained a stern exterior. She growled in a threatening manner for most of her daylight hours and quite often in her sleep. As I renewed my acquaintance with her I noticed that the ferocity of her growling was not as intense as I recalled from the previous year.

"Fact is Russ, she's pregnant. To a bull-terrier we've acquired since you were here last," Henry explained. In an attempt to prove Henry wrong, Growlie increased the volume of her growling. I continued to scratch behind her ears.

Three cats lived at Glen-Ayle. Two big gingers, who teased Growlie and sought attention from visitors, and an old grey tabby named Tiger. Tiger was aloof and superior. He watched scornfully as the two gingers maneuvered among us for pats and scratches.

"It takes a long time to get to know old Tige," said Henry. "You see, he doesn't trust humans. He was a real menace when he was young. Always in the house causing all kinds of trouble. We gave him a hard time and now he won't have much to do with us. He sees the ginger cats going in and out of the house and he'll hop onto the porch here but he won't go through the door. Maybe he thinks he's a superior kind of cat."

All eyes were on Tiger, sitting a respectable distance from the porch. He knew Henry was talking about him. He got slowly to his feet and walked disdainfully out of sight around the corner of the house.

The Glen-Ayle pets provided an initial talking point which allowed everyone to join in and get to know each other. The conversation soon flowed easily. I pointed out the ornamental mulga to Chud and Noel.

While most station owners establish lawns and hedges around the house, Henry had made a feature of a few mulga trees growing close to the back porch. The ornamental mulga epitomised the Glen-Ayle style. To start a cattle and sheep station on the edge of the desert, there had to be changes. But the changes Henry and his family had wrought were essential. They made no alterations for show or the sake of tradition.

While I approved of the mulga, I drew sustenance from the lemon trees. One of Henry's first acts when he travelled out and selected the site for his

homestead in 1953 was to plant two lemon trees. They had grown into fine healthy trees, now laden with tangy fruit. In the desert, lemons are good fare. They can bounce around in the back of a vehicle for a few weeks and become dirty and bruised. However, when cut the juice is still good in tea or coffee - an addition which may pass unnoticed in town but which is a luxury in the desert.

As a boy and youth, Henry had worked with his uncle in the Wiluna district. While employed as a camel-man with the geologist Talbot, Henry's uncle had realised the pastoral potential of the Glen-Ayle area. He passed the knowledge on to his nephew.

Thirty-one thousand acres around Weld Spring was the subject of a pastoral lease taken up by William Snell in 1938. Snell, whose life's history has many connections with the Canning Stock Route, died on his lease, which he called Coolya, in 1942. Henry took up the country east and south-east of Coolya to make up the 740,000 acres of Glen-Ayle.

The name Glen-Ayle has no complicated origin. "I just liked the name," said Henry.

I like the name and, in a way, it's an appropriate one. Giles left many Scottish place names in the Australian desert. I once considered these names to be out of place but through constant use and their very existence they have become part of the character of the country. They ring of Giles. Similarly, Glen-Ayle rings of Henry Ward and his family.

Henry told us a good story about the first road out to Glen-Ayle. He pushed north from Earacheedy - at that time, the northern-most homestead - and chose the site for his Glen-Ayle.

He then spent a good deal of time locating and marking a better route from Earacheedy to his chosen site. The road-makers, however, left Earacheedy and followed Henry's original tracks - the ones he had made on his initial push north. So, like many of today's roads, this one unerringly follows the first tentative footsteps of man.

When Henry finished building the house he brought his wife, Eileen, to Glen-Ayle. They have five children and the property is truly family run. All the Wards played an active role in the development of the station.

After the scones and Vegie we moved over to our Land-Rovers. We talked about motor vehicles until lunch-time. We sat at the table long after the meal had finished. Then we unpacked the Land-Rovers and re-organised our gear. With things in such a mess after only nine wells, I hesitated to think on how things would be after more than fifty wells - at Halls Creek.

The living room at Glen-Ayle contains a large table which serves as a centre for social contact. As if it were a campfire, we sat around it for many hours.

After tea I showed Henry our maps and outlined the route we planned to take. We had asked him to come with us. He declined. He wanted to make the trip, but duties at Glen-Ayle were too numerous. Holidays are

brief and closely regimented on pastoral runs in fringe country.

I did my best to take Henry up the stock route with the maps. In slow succession we travelled over the fifteen 1:250 000 maps that cover the Canning Stock Route. I led him away from the stock route to visit Separation Well and Helena Spring. Two historic sites we proposed to visit - food and petrol permitting.

The maps tell the story of the stock route better than any written account or collection of slides. They provide a background against which the story of human endeavour comes to life. The hills, the waterholes, the ridges, the rock outcrops and the traces of desert travellers are clearly marked, although some are endorsed with an ominous "P.A." - position approximate.

Noel, as well as Henry, paid close attention to my travelogue. No doubt he was seeking some proof that I could find my way to Halls Creek after my shaky start from Wiluna to Glen-Ayle.

Henry knew of Canning's water No. 17 which is contained in the Durba Hills, the most attractive oasis on the entire stock route. In 1958, Henry and Harry Wheeler of the Western Australia Water Supply drove up to the hills. Henry spoke enthusiastically of this journey.

Mrs Ward, however, who has lived at Glen-Ayle since the early fifties, was justifiably irate at having to listen to descriptions of Durba Hills. She has known many people who have visited the hills, returned to Glen-Ayle and treated her to wonderful accounts of the place. These travellers then disappear, south or east, never to return, while she, living so much closer, has yet to see the Durba Hills herself. She didn't think it was fair. I agreed. Very few men argue with Mrs Ward - certainly not successfully.

On our second morning at Glen-Ayle, Chud and Noel sent telegrams to their respective homes announcing their safe arrival at Glen-Ayle. I smugly imagined the policeman at Wiluna, raising his eyebrows in surprise, on hearing we had reached Henry's so quickly.

We spent the day in leisurely preparations. Chud and Noel serviced the Land-Rovers. We topped up with petrol. Every tank was brimming over. As well as lemons, Henry supplied us with potatoes, onions and, most importantly, meat. He had expertly prepared a large amount of salted (jerked) beef and a small amount of fresh meat.

With our washing dry we packed the vehicles. We even pointed them in the direction of the gate.

The afternoon smoko extended through to the evening meal. We drank some beer. Henry was an excellent host and a good barman. One of my clearest and fondest memories of Glen-Ayle is Henry, appearing in the doorway, smiling broadly, with an opened bottle of beer in each hand.

We wanted to know about the Canning Stock Route drovers. Chud asked the questions. Henry answered them from memory.

Chud sat with his pencil poised above his notebook and began: "I

know Tom Cole brought the first mob down to Wiluna in 1910 ...”

Henry held up his hand. "No Chud. Not quite. Cole had the leading mob and he was first to reach Windich Spring. But while he was camped there another mob came through, passed Cole's and so reached Wiluna first."

"I see. Then who was that?" Chud asked.

"I don't know. I'd like to, but. A bit of a mystery about him. Whoever it was travelled quickly and quietly. Some people reckoned the cattle were stolen. My uncle saw them just south of Wiluna. He told me there was a woman with them. Anyhow they rested a few days at a swamp my uncle showed them and moved on down to Leonora."

"Okay. This mystery man was first. Tom Cole must've been second. Who was third?"

Henry knew. Chud continued to write.

"Frank Johnson was third. He brought a mob of horses down in 1922. Long while after the first two, eh? He managed Ethel Creek in the 30's. You'd have passed Ethel Creek when you went out to Balfour Downs."

"Yes, we did," said Chud. "Alright, now which drover travelled the stock route the most?"

Henry looked at the ceiling and considered. "It'd be between Dave Bickley and Wally Dowling. Bickley was the first after the stock route was re-conditioned in 1931. He came again every year for the next three years and then again in 1950. Also in 1950 he took the only mob to travel up the stock route. I remember he passed through here early in October with 200 bulls from Wongawol station. He got to Billiluna just before Christmas."

"Right," said Chud, "that's six trips to Bickley."

"Yeah. That'd be about right. But remember, whenever they brought a mob down, they had to go back up with the plant equipment and horses. Camels, too, if they had 'em."

"I see," said Chud. "Now what about Wally Dowling? We've heard quite a bit about him already."

Henry smiled. "Yes, everyone's heard of Wally. He first came down the Canning with Fred Terone in 1942 with cattle from Mulla Bulla. Then again in 44, 49, 56 and 57. That gives him a total of five trips. I knew Wally quite well. He was about six feet tall and about 13 stone, dark in colour, spoke slowly, walked slowly, drank strong - very black - tea by the gallon. A great showman. A great storyteller - not exactly a liar. He would yarn all night, was never stuck for something to say, considered water was only for drinking, and boots? - why, he never had any use for them. Let his feet grow to their natural size, he did. His were like camel pads."

Henry waited for Chud to stop writing.

"Sounds like a bit of a character," I said.

"You said it, Russ. He's someone a book should be written about."

Reads a lot himself. Writes good bush poetry too. But there's so many stories. It'd be a real job to get them altogether to work out which were true, which were partly true and the others that were something else altogether."

Chud was ready to push on. "Okay. So much for Wally Dowling. What about George Lanigan? He helped H.A. Johnson when he first came here, didn't he?"

"That's right, Chud. And Johnson couldn't have picked a better man. George is a fine person. There's not much he doesn't know about the Canning, droving, station management and stock in general."

"How many trips?" asked Chud.

"Let me see. Three or four. But my memory's not perfect you know. I should be checking all this in my diary."

"You're doin' okay," Chud assured him. "Now one more question. How many mobs, all told - from the first in 1910 to the last in the late 50s - came down the Canning?"

"Hell Chud, that's a tough one. Let's see."

Henry studied the ceiling again. He began quoting names and years and counting on his fingers. Harris, Hill, Dick Smith, Mal and Len Brown, Gordon, Kelly the Nip, Ben Taylor - drovers, the real users - the real men - of the Canning Stock Route. And the only written work concerning these men and their exploits are the names and initials and dates in rocks and trees along the Canning. And even this record is not complete. Many drovers were too busy to record their presence in this way.

Finally Henry shifted his gaze from the ceiling back to Chud.

"Well, my guess - and it is a bit of a guess - is 27."

Chud wrote down 27.

Henry told us that Ben Taylor, a three time stock route traveller, was a good friend of his. He now managed Lamboo station, west of Halls Creek.

"When you get there," he went on, "go and see Ben. Give him my regards and tell him one of my sons will be up to work with him next year. Write it down in your book Chud. Ben Taylor. Lamboo. It's just out of Halls Creek."

Chud wrote it down, underlined it and closed his notebook.

Then Noel spoke. "That covers the drovers, Henry. But what about motor vehicles. I know you drove up to Durba in 1958 but when did the first motor vehicles come onto the stock route?"

Henry resumed speaking. Chud re-opened his notebook and resumed writing.

As far back as 1927 a free-lance dingo trapper named George Herbert - and Henry knew him quite well - had ridden a motor-bike with side-car up to Well 11. Two years later, surveyor Harold Payne used two, four-cylinder Chevrolet trucks when he fixed the boundaries of Earacheedy and Granite Peak. His survey extended to McConkey Hill, north of Well 10. During the 30s Wiluna

storekeepers delivered supplies - by motor vehicles - to the droving teams at Well 11.

"Got all that, Chud?" Henry concluded.

"Yes. That's all good stuff. That'll be fine," said Chud.

"Okay. So far I've been doing all the talking. I'm dry. Wait till I get some more beer and you boys can tell me something. You must have some stories to tell about the trip so far."

Throughout my travels with Chud, I have on many occasions extended the truth to make a good story. These stories usually feature misfortunes and accidents that have befallen Chud rather than myself.

However, on our final night at Glen-Ayle, Chud upstaged me. With the optimum amount of Emu Bitter aboard, he launched into a detailed account of my mistaking the turkey for a camel - an albino camel. Henry, sitting opposite Chud, was reduced to tears. He raised his hands in front of his face in a gesture of supplication. It was too funny. He pleaded with Chud for mercy. "Stop." He couldn't bear it. "Stop, stop, please. You're killing me." Chud carried on, allowing Henry no respite. He described my antics: sitting on top of the Land-Rover, searching the horizon through binoculars, for a camel. Henry rocked back on his chair, slapping his thighs with the palms of his hands. At the climax, when Chud related how I recognised the innocent turkey, Henry could barely utter an "Oh no" so weak was he from laughing. His weather-beaten face shone with tears. The evening's yarning was over. No one could match Chud's story.

Apparently, for several years after our visit, Henry often said, "She's a beaut, Chud" - as I had said of the camel/turkey and as Chud had faithfully related - whenever he saw anything worthy of praise. The line became a part of his lexicon.

We left Glen-Ayle after morning smoko the next day. Noel caused a slight delay to our departure. The Glen-Ayle gramophone had worked hard during our stay and although there was a fine selection of Slim Dusty, Noel had favoured the newest record of the Ward collection - *Sadie, the Cleaning Lady*.

Noel, dressed for the road in his heavy boots, baggy grey shorts and an old shirt with the sleeves rolled up, sat on a chair near the gramophone. He leaned forward so that his right ear was inches from the speaker. His elbows rested on his knees and each hand gripped the opposite arm's bicep as he marvelled at the immature outpourings of Johnny Farnham. This was the only time on the entire stock route journey that I doubted Noel's judgement.

When I finally prised him away from the music we took our leave of the Wards. It was another starting out. Many miles of uninhabited country lay before us. Unless Frank Welsh came out from Yarrie to collect his twenty cents, our next contact with people would be at far-off Billiluna.

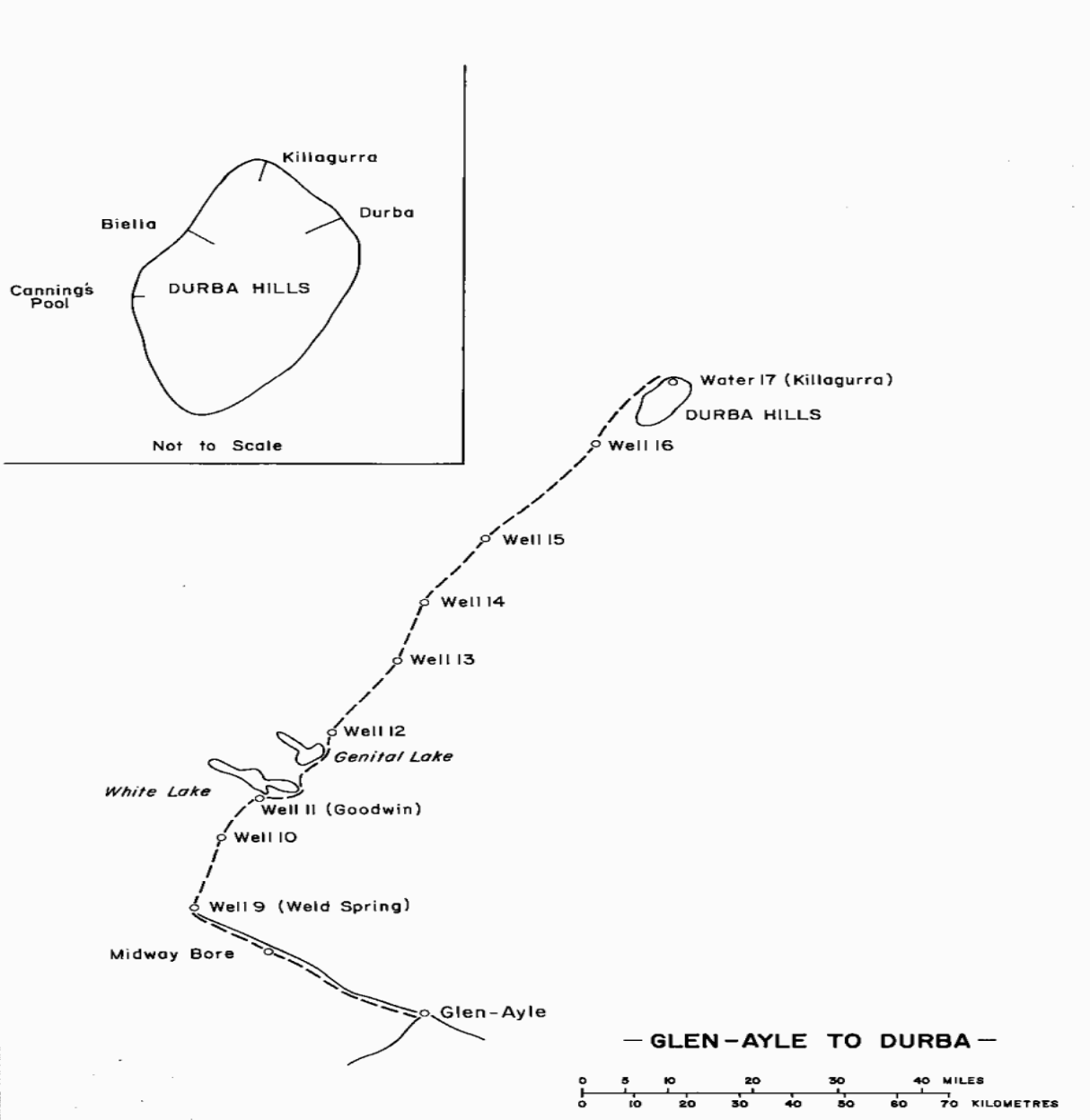
In a sense, Glen-Ayle and Billiluna were neighbours. They both shared the Great Sandy Desert as a boundary. Travelling via the Canning Stock Route, after Glen-Ayle the next property was Billiluna.

“What’s this bloke at Billiluna like? Asked Henry.

“He’s a good bloke,” I told him.

“Good bloke, eh? Well, you tell him that if any cleanskins come wandering into his place from the south, he's to leave them alone. They'll be Glen-Ayle stock.”

CHAPTER 10



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Glen-Ayle to Durba

We headed back out to Well 9. Not far from my old camp at Midway bore, we followed directions Henry had given us to an aboriginal ceremonial ground. A number of stones, of various shapes and sizes, were placed on edge in an arc: to me, a haphazard, even ludicrous, design. Yet there was something strange about those stones, hidden away in the bush, with no footprints or campfire remains nearby. The birds seemed quiet. I kept looking over my shoulder. We did not stay long.

We continued on to Well 9, drove around Forrest's stone fort and resumed our drive up the Canning Stock Route. Well 10 is in the centre of a twenty mile stretch of scrubby, non-sandridge country. Numerous confused, inconsequential dry water-courses criss-crossed the area and Well 10 was on one of them. The timber of the well and the troughing beside were intact - as the well is close to good water at Well 9, it is rarely used as a camp site.

Well 11 was more interesting. It is on an arm of the aptly named White Lake. Behind the well we found a soak: a hole about four feet deep with some muddy water at the bottom. On a headland into the lake there was a stone wall, modelled on Forrest's fort at Well 9, but in a more advanced state of disrepair. A couple of iron tyres lay nearby.

Canning named the water Goodwin Soak. Goodwin was a Wiluna bank manager and a friend of Canning's. I suggested that Canning may have honoured Goodwin for pecuniary reasons. Chud said no. His admiration for Canning would allow no aspersions of this kind.

From this point onwards, Canning identified all the waters by their aboriginal names. He reasoned that drovers seeking the wells could ask the local aborigines for directions. Some of his attempts to anglicise the aboriginal names resulted in strange words - strange to men, both black and white.

A similar effort to retain aboriginal names resulted in a river in eastern Australia being named the Yo-yo. The explorer justified his decision with the claim that when he asked the aborigines for the name of the river they replied, "Yo-yo." He also admitted that they gave the same answer to most of the questions he put to them.

Regardless of the accuracy or pronounceability of the names Canning gave to the waters along his stock route, the words have become adopted in some form or other and are confidently bandied among stock route travellers of today.

After Goodwin and the White Lake is another small salt lake, definitely genital (male) in shape. The lake is on the western side of the stock route's position on the map. I had good reason to remember it from the previous year.

Extending our survey down from the north, we came to the shore of

“genital” lake. My drivers in 1967, Greg and Clyde, looked enviously at its smooth white surface and recalled the many miles of sandridges we had bumped over to reach this point. I was sorely tempted. Against all the advice I had received about driving on salt lakes I propped up the limp argument that because it was late in the season - a long time since the last rain - the surface would be solid. I dug my heels into it. It certainly felt solid.

I risked it. Keeping close to the edge, Greg was breezing along at 30 m.p.h. over the billiard table surface. I was about to congratulate myself on a brave decision, when I was suddenly forced to acknowledge my own foolishness. Fortunately Clyde had not followed.

He drove around the lake's edge and winched Greg's vehicle clear.

I led Chud and Noel down to the edge of the lake. The bog and wheel tracks of the previous year still scarred the surface.

“A monument to incompetence,” declared Chud.

“Maybe just evidence of an error,” said Noel.

“Yes, well it wasn't a real smart thing to do,” I acknowledged. “Mud bogs can be bad but you wait till you're stuck in a salt lake bog. They're much worse. Under that white surface is pink mud. Fathoms and fathoms of it. To make things worse, once you stand in the same spot a couple of times you start to sink yourself. Your boots become full of pink mud. So you work in bare feet. Then, working in the bog with axes, jacks and logs of wood you soon bark or cut your knuckles - your feet and ankles as well. When the salt gets into the tiniest scratch, believe me, you'll know it.”

Chud and Noel exchanged glances. They shook their heads wisely. They would never have been so foolhardy.

Back among the sandridges we came to a desert oak - the first we had seen. We decided to camp.

The dominant colours of the desert tend to be harsh and bright. Spinifex, red sand, eucalypts and wattle strike the eye. By contrast, the sombre, drooping, dark-green foliage of the desert oak soothes the traveller's eye. The promise of comprehensive shade. A feeling of relief. Comfort. To sight an oak in the desert is like seeing a friend's face in a crowded city street.

The desert oak is of the same family (Casuarina) as the River Oaks that grow along the streams in south-east New South Wales. The country I grew up in. I associate the soft murmur of a breeze in an oak tree with the peace and innocence of childhood. I like desert oak camps.

At this camp began one of the routines that entertained Chud and myself along the Canning Stock Route.

Noel considered his vehicle overloaded. So, each evening he jacked up its rear to ease the strain on the back springs. For this purpose, Noel had brought along a mechanical jack. Invariably the positioning and raising of the jack caused Noel some trouble. During this nightly operation he levelled

a standard of abuse that only an object as inanimate as a mechanical jack could withstand. Noel knew how to curse. Without being particularly obscene, blasphemous or repetitive he could speak a language that shone with all the colours of the rainbow. To this day, in moments of dire exasperation, I resort to expressions I learnt from Noel on the Canning Stock Route.

Early next morning we visited Well 12. Two desert oaks provided an effective background for my photograph of this well.

The next landmark was of more recent vintage. The surveyor, H.A. Johnson, had wired a bullock's head to a tree, removed the jaw-bones and inserted them in the top of the skull and nailed an empty fish snack tin beneath it. The desert dogger, Peter Muir, had written a small rhyme on the skull.

Johnston erected his monument in 1959, when he made his initial foray into the desert. He drove up to Well 14 to test his vehicle's ability in sandridge country. In 1967, I met Peter Muir and his wife, Dolly, following our survey traverse up to Durba Hills. Each man, in his own way, wanted to record his presence in the desert.

Well 13 was a couple of hundred yards west of the track. It lies between two sandridges which terminate beside the track. So, to reach the well I turned left and proceeded down the gap between the ridges. However, I miscounted and turned left from the track one ridge too late. We travelled down the couple of hundred yards - no well. I realised my error and walked up the ridge on our southern side and saw the well immediately below me. Rather than drive over an extra ridge, Chud and Noel walked back with me to inspect it.

There was a large clump of mulga near the well. I found an old, ant-eaten coolamon and saw other evidence that the well had once been a meeting place for aborigines.

We encountered several ridges on the way to Well 14. We crossed them easily. Chud reckoned that the sand still retained moisture from the recent rain. The moisture held the sand together and provided a firmer surface which made the going easier for the vehicles.

Beyond Well 14, the country was littered with claypans and patches of low bush which indicated soft ground. Once again we began detouring, detouring our detours and getting bogged. Noel's Land-Rover towed Chud's out of trouble and, on the occasions when Noel took the lead, the towing positions were reversed. It was slow going.

Late in the afternoon, with more sandridges and solid ground in sight, Noel's vehicle bogged badly. After a couple of unsuccessful attempts to dig and tow it back, Chud decided to drive his vehicle around Noel's to a patch of firm ground and tow forward from there. On this simple manoeuvre Chud's vehicle bogged. We worked till dark and achieved very little. So, on

our second night out from Glen-Ayle we camped with both Land-Rovers bogged.

Hardly a promising start. Yet, Chud and I were genuinely unconcerned about our predicament. Maybe our training in this form of travel out from Balfour Downs had cured us of worrying about bogged vehicles.

We enjoyed a couple of Henry Ward's prime steaks for tea. After coffee and a yarn, Noel walked off into the darkness to sleep closer to his vehicle.

Physically weary, I bedded down early to read.

The arm of co-incidence worked overtime to have me reading Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* on the Canning Stock Route. Hardy is always good value and for this reason I had brought one of his books with me. The coincidence was that, by chance, I chose a Hardy novel that deals with human foibles in a harsh and lonely environment.

Human foibles and harshness and loneliness of environment are relative quantities. Twenty miles of Hardy's Egdon Heath in England has much in common with a thousand miles of the Great Sandy Desert in Australia. The first chapter of "the Native" is titled *A Face on Which Time Makes But Little Impression*. I read:

"The sky was a tent which had the whole heath for its floor...A thing majestic without severity, impressive without showiness, emphatic in its admonitions, grand in its simplicity ... civilisation was its enemy ... the great inviolate place had an ancient permanence which the sea cannot claim."

This was not English heathland. It was Australian desert.

In the morning we left our swags at six and both vehicles were on solid ground by eight.

A long wide spinifex plain led to Well 15. Here we found water tanks and various other containers designed to be carried by camels. These articles interested us more than the well. It was mid-morning before we were ready to leave.

Mid-morning is a good time of day in a desert winter. The sun is gaining in strength. I take off my footy jumper and feel warm and energetic in shorts and T-shirt. The day is young. The prospect of a day of travel lies ahead. The water in the vehicle's tank is still cold from the desert night. I have no qualms about drinking water so early in the day.

The water in the vehicle's cooling system is also cool enough to ensure optimum engine performance. Morning is the best time to tackle sandridges. After Well 15 we came to sandridge country.

I noticed Chud marking a paper each time we crossed a sandridge.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm counting how many ridges we cross."

"Why?"

"When the Leylands crossed the Simpson they reckon they crossed one thousand and twenty sandridges. Our desert is about twice as wide as the Simpson, so we should be able to beat them."

"I don't know about that," I said. "It's best to detour round ridges rather than bust your vehicle's guts by going straight over. I reckon that the fewer ridges you cross and the more you drive around, the better chance you have of getting through."

"I suppose so," said Chud, "but I'll keep a check anyway."

Several ridges later, Chud rolled back from a steep one. For the first time the Land-Rover had failed to get over at the initial attempt.

"Yes, better to go round if you can," said Chud, as if there had been no break in our conversation.

Between Wells 15 and 16 Canning's map shows Giles' 1876 route crossing the stock route. Giles was travelling west to east, with camels. Again, I spared him a thought.

After the frustrating years with horses in central Australia, there was no holding Giles when he equipped his party with camels. After a trial trip along the Great Australian Bight, Giles crossed the Great Victoria Desert from the Overland Telegraph Line to Perth in 1875. He spent Christmas in that city, then headed north, turned east and crossed back to the Overland Telegraph Line about 120 miles north of Forrest's route.

Giles rightly claimed he was the first to travel east to west and back again. However, I have always felt that on the dual crossing Giles' main concern was to prove himself, at the very least, the equal of Warburton and Forrest.

He envied Warburton for his camels when he met the Colonel travelling up to Alice Springs on the first leg of his trip in 1873. He resented the fact that one of his old trails (with horses) helped lead Forrest to the safety of the Overland Telegraph Line.

Giles' explorations did not bring him the satisfaction he both sought and deserved. In his final remarks in *Australia Twice Traversed* he regrets he "had to record the existence of such large areas of desert land." Fortunately, his sense of humour never deserted him. On the same page he states:

"If my narrative has no other recommendation, it may at least serve to while away a vacant hour, and remind my readers of something better, they have read before."

No Giles, you were better than you knew: as both explorer and writer.

As we topped a ridge near Well 16, I glimpsed the distant blue plateau of the Durba Hills. Gravelly rises were now intruding into the sandridge country. Closer to the hills I saw how the sand had retaliated by stretching a solitary ridge over the southern edge of the hills.

The Durba Hills are the main tourist attraction of the Canning Stock Route. Rather than a group of hills, Durba is a plateau, almost oval-shaped, long axis

(north-south) about ten miles long and the shorter axis (east-west) about five miles long. On the western side the plateau rises sharply from the desert floor and then falls gradually away to the east to merge with the sandridges. The country on the western side is rocky and broken by creeks flowing out of the hills.

We drove north along the western side. Chud had to brake sharply a couple of times to avoid driving into rock outcrops or holes. The hills to his right drew his eyes from the track in front.

Eventually, "What's that?" he asked.

"Where?"

"Up there. Look up there. Abo paintings."

Chud pointed to extravagant splashes of white on the cliff face near the top of the plateau, a couple of hundred feet from the desert floor.

Noel drove up beside us.

"Let's go and check out those paintings," said Chud.

We scrambled over and around the heaped up boulders that had broken away from the cliffs over the eons. Breathless, we stood beneath the "paintings."

"By the size of those stains I'd say there are some awful big birds, with awful big appetites and awful weak bowels in these parts," I told Chud.

"I don't think they did them all at the one sitting," he told me.

"What's that you said 'sitting'?"

We climbed back down.

Nearly half way along the western side of the hills a water course comes out of the plateau. It forms a headland which is the western-most point of Durba Hills. On this prominence Canning built a trig station: a cairn of stones around a wooden pole.

Again we climbed up to the top of the cliffs. From the trig point the view west is of desert sands containing occasional hill outcrops, while east we saw the broken serrated top of the plateau dipping away to merge with the sandridges. Below us, in the water-course, was Canning's Pool. We camped beside it.

I think of this point on the Canning Stock Route as Canning's memorial. A trig beacon is an appropriate monument to honour a surveyor and the pool below is one of the few landmarks on the stock route that bear Canning's name.

The original reason for establishing a Halls Creek-Wiluna stock route is stated in the letter appointing Canning to the job.

"The main object the government has in view in attempting to open this stock-route is to enable cattle to travel from tick infested areas in the East Kimberleys to the Eastern Goldfields without running the risk of infecting pastoral lands that are served by the stock-routes running south from the De

Grey River ..."

It is important to realise that Canning's stock route survey did not simply consist of a single journey from Wiluna to Halls Creek. Canning spent the best part of four years travelling up and down between the two towns locating the stock route and constructing the wells.

The initial expedition left Wiluna in May 1906. Canning's first job was to determine if a stock route through the desert was feasible. By the time he reached Durba Hills, Canning is reported as saying, "There'll be water all the way." So he continued north.

He pressed local aborigines into his party and they led him to their native wells. He sank bores to find sub-surface water. He fixed the position of the native wells and successful bores and located areas of feed for cattle. The party arrived at Halls Creek in late October and, after Christmas, Canning led his men back into the desert. They found more watering points and extended the mapping to be able to determine the best position for the stock route.

Canning arrived back in Perth in July 1907. His report convinced the government that a Wiluna-Halls Creek stock route was possible. However, before construction could begin, Canning had to defend himself against a charge that he had mistreated aborigines on the initial journey. The charges were made by the cook on that expedition. A Royal Commission cleared Canning and his men.

Early in 1908, Canning returned to Wiluna with a much larger party to construct a line of wells through the desert. On the outward trip north Canning's men built 31 wells. This time they were in the field for 18 months - reaching Halls Creek in time for Christmas 1909. On the return trip south another 21 wells were constructed. From the Wiluna Post Office, in April 1910, Canning advised his superiors:

"Work completed."

Canning's reticence to enlarge upon his achievements is refreshingly modest in these days of lengthy telegrams, copious telex messages and exultant press releases.

In the morning we, reverently, filled our water tanks at his pool.

According to our (provisional) Gunanya 1:250 000 map, there are three springs in the Durba Hills. The most southern, Biella, is about three miles north of Canning's Pool. We parked the vehicles and walked into the hills to find it. We soon came to pools of water. Long, deep pools in a rocky creek bed. We walked further. The pools became smaller and totally enclosed in rock formations.

Each pool was at a slightly higher level than the one before and connected by a small waterfall. The creek divided into two distinct arms. There was water in both. We identified another tributary which, according to the map, contained Biella Spring. It was dry.

We turned around and began the walk back. Happy to enjoy the beauty

of Biella without carrying out a map check, Chud had a swim, but I resisted and advised Noel to do the same. A swim before lunch in a desert pool can cause an overwhelming weariness in the afternoon heat as Chud soon discovered.

The northern tip of the hills is four miles beyond Biella, and Killagurra Spring is in a narrow gorge near this point. It is a small box canyon with the spring at its head. The entrance is shielded by dense vegetation which extends back to the spring itself. We drove to within 100 yards of the head of the canyon, ate our lunch and then walked up to the water called Killagurra.

It is a true spring. The water trickles out of the rocks and forms a pool about 25 feet square and ten feet deep. Water, beautiful clear water, overflows the pool and runs down towards the entrance to the canyon, sustaining the lush vegetation along its length.

Noel and I swam energetically, Chud somewhat lethargically. We basked on the rocks behind the pool and inspected a line of aboriginal figures painted under an overhanging ledge nearby.

The third spring, called Durba, is the best camping spot. We followed the cliff face south-east from Killagurra. Durba is another box canyon, but its entrance is wide and clear. Inside, the ground cover is couch grass - soothing after spinifex. There are majestic gumtrees in the Durba canyon and, along the western side, ample water.

We parked the vehicles by some old sliprails, close to the water, on clear level ground. There was plenty of shade. Noel boiled the billy. After a cup of tea our energy returned. There were still a couple of hours of daylight. Chud and Noel traced the water-courses back into the hills. They found more pools and aboriginal paintings.

I climbed to the top of the plateau to take a photograph of the sandridges to the north. I have never seen a picture of sandridges that portrays their true nature.

I have taken photographs from the top, the side and the bottom of sandridges and the resulting slides have given no indication of the height, the steepness, the unbroken continuity or the large number of successive ridges. Photographs taken from an aeroplane are equally unsatisfactory. These photographs are merely large scale maps.

My climb to the top of Durba resulted in more unsatisfactory slides. I ventured close enough to the edge of the cliff to induce a tremor in the hand holding the camera. I could see these slides would be a failure. I photographed a small square of sandridge country which gave no indication of their true proportions. From the elevated point the height of the ridges appeared deceptively low.

I placed the camera on a rock beside me and my preoccupation with the physical dimensions and extent of the sandridges gave way to a general contemplation of the scene. The wonder of the desert made me realise my

own foolishness in trying to record it on emulsion. Other ideas and impressions flooded my mind, but I was unable to focus them into a logical sequence to be able to extract a conclusion. There was something there, somewhere, but I was unable to tie it down.

I hurried back to camp and consulted "the Native." Even Thomas Hardy had failed to put it together in an orderly form. However, by re-arranging him slightly and changing a couple of words, I came up with: "... the eye could reach nothing of the world outside the summits and shoulders of desert land which filled the whole circumference of its glance ... everything around and underneath had been from the historic times as unaltered as the stars overhead ... it had waited thus, unmoved, during so many centuries, through the crisis of so many things, that it could only be imagined to await one last crisis - the final overthrow."

Yes, that was it. Thank you Thomas.

I joined Chud and Noel at the campfire.

"How'd you go? Get a good picture?" asked Chud.

"No. No good at all. I still couldn't get the sandridges they really are," I replied.

"Never mind," he consoled me, "no one else has done it either. At least you've seen them and know what they're like, even if you can't photograph them."

"There's lots of things that can't be photographed. Not properly," said Noel.

On the rock wall behind the largest pool of water at Durba Spring is a roll of honour. Pride of place is occupied by "H.S.T. 1906" carved in figures close to one foot high. They are the initials of Herbert Stanislake Trotman, Canning's second in command. The neatly scribed words "Bull Shit" beside Trotman's initials indicate that a more recent visitor doubted the authenticity of this work.

Around Trotman's name, in a variety of sizes and styles, were the names of drovers who brought cattle down the stock route. Travelling from Halls Creek south, the drovers, when they reached Durba, would have been quite light-hearted. Their journey was almost over. I can imagine the satisfaction they derived by recording their presence at this rock-hole. Some drovers made the trip several times and recorded each year beside their name.

The last mob of cattle used the stock route in the late fifties, so when I reached Durba from the north, in the previous year, I had proudly carved into the rock my own name and those of my workmates, along with the year, 1967. Now I wanted to record my presence for a second time. Before breaking camp next morning, I entered the water with a claw-hammer and a screw-driver. I waded across to make the addition to the roll of honour.

But not without some discomfort. At seven o'clock in the morning the

water was very cold. I had to stand knee deep in its icy grip to chip the names of Chud, Noel and myself near my work of 1967. My calligraphy of 1968 did not compare favourably with my work of the previous year. The shaking, and then the numbness in my knees, affected my concentration.

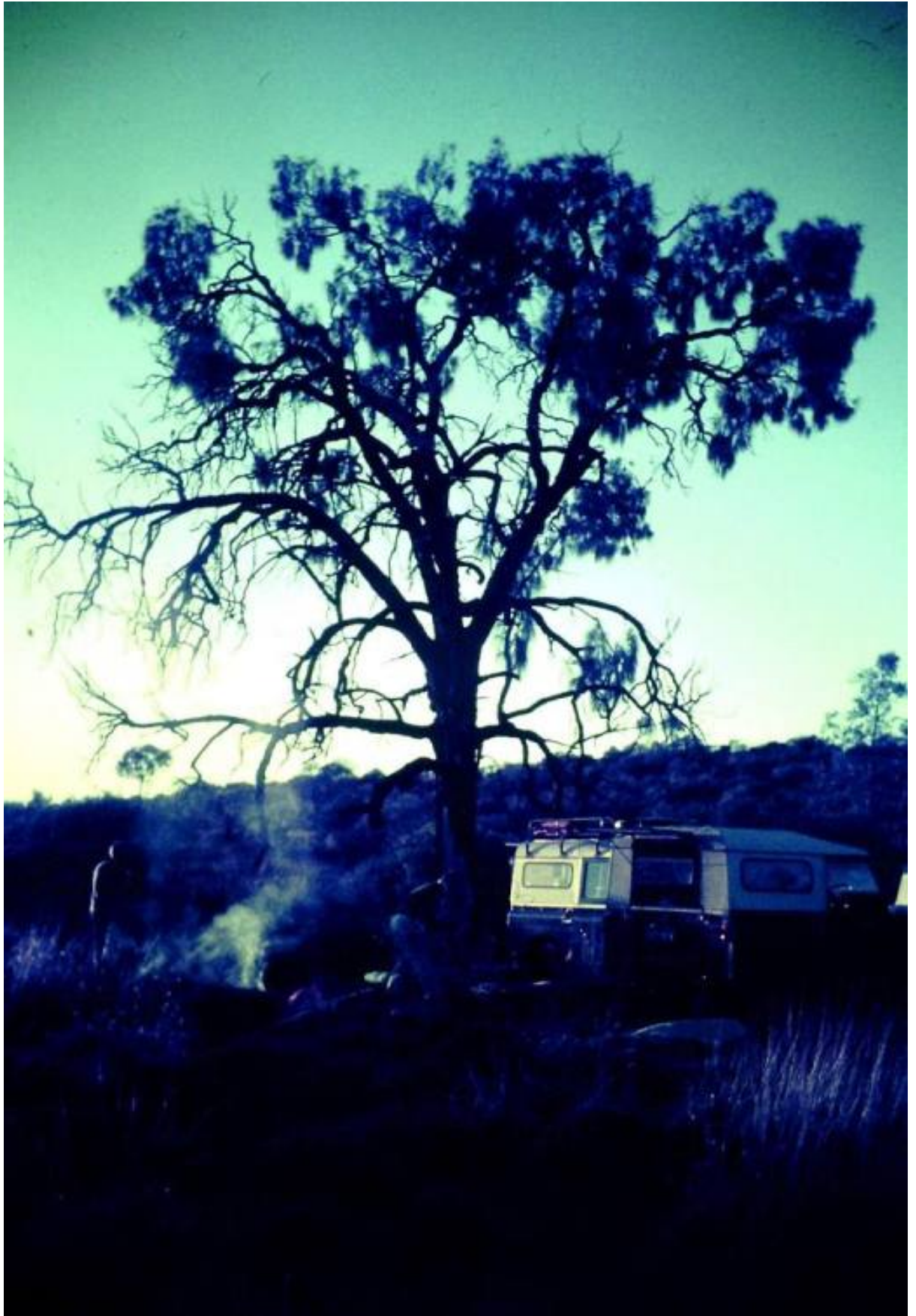
"Don't forget it's a double 'l' in my surname," Noel called.

"She'll be right," I answered.

I overdid it. I spelt his name with a triple 'l'.



Fort at Goodwin



Making camp beside a desert oak



The Johnson-Muir tree



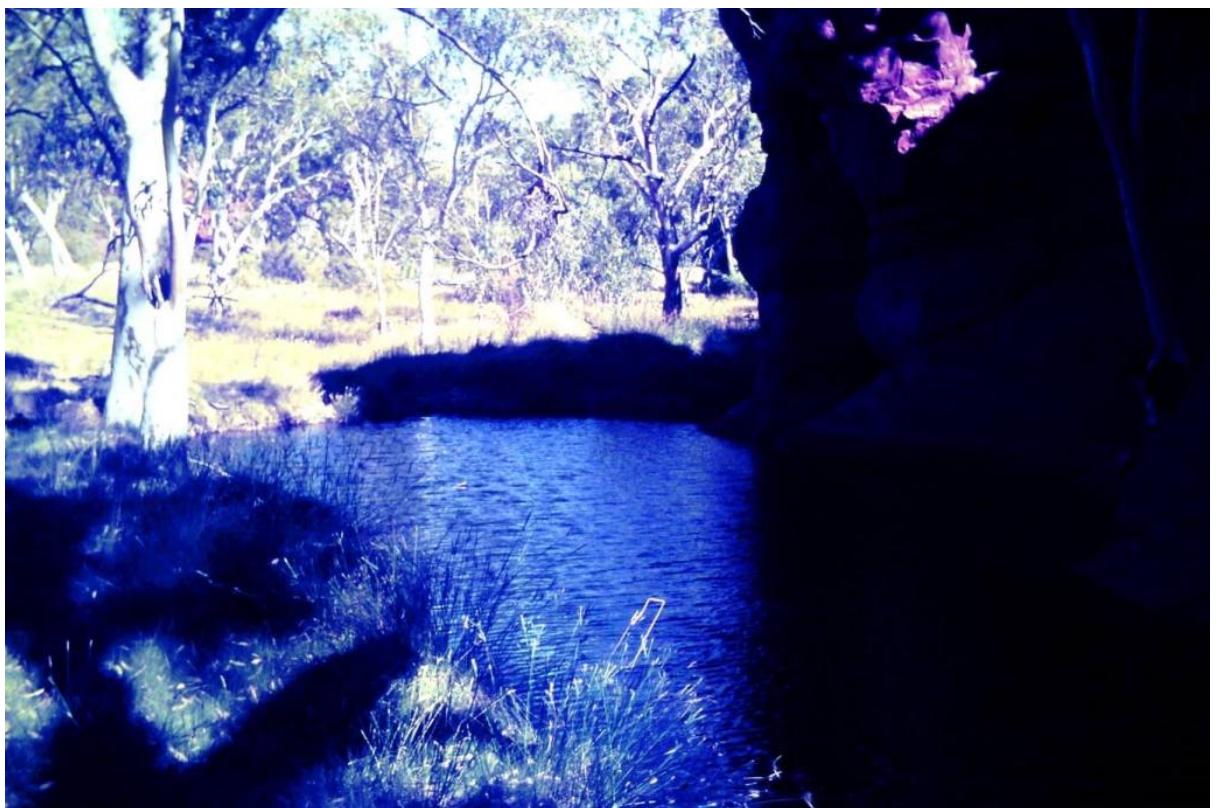
Canning Pool at sunrise



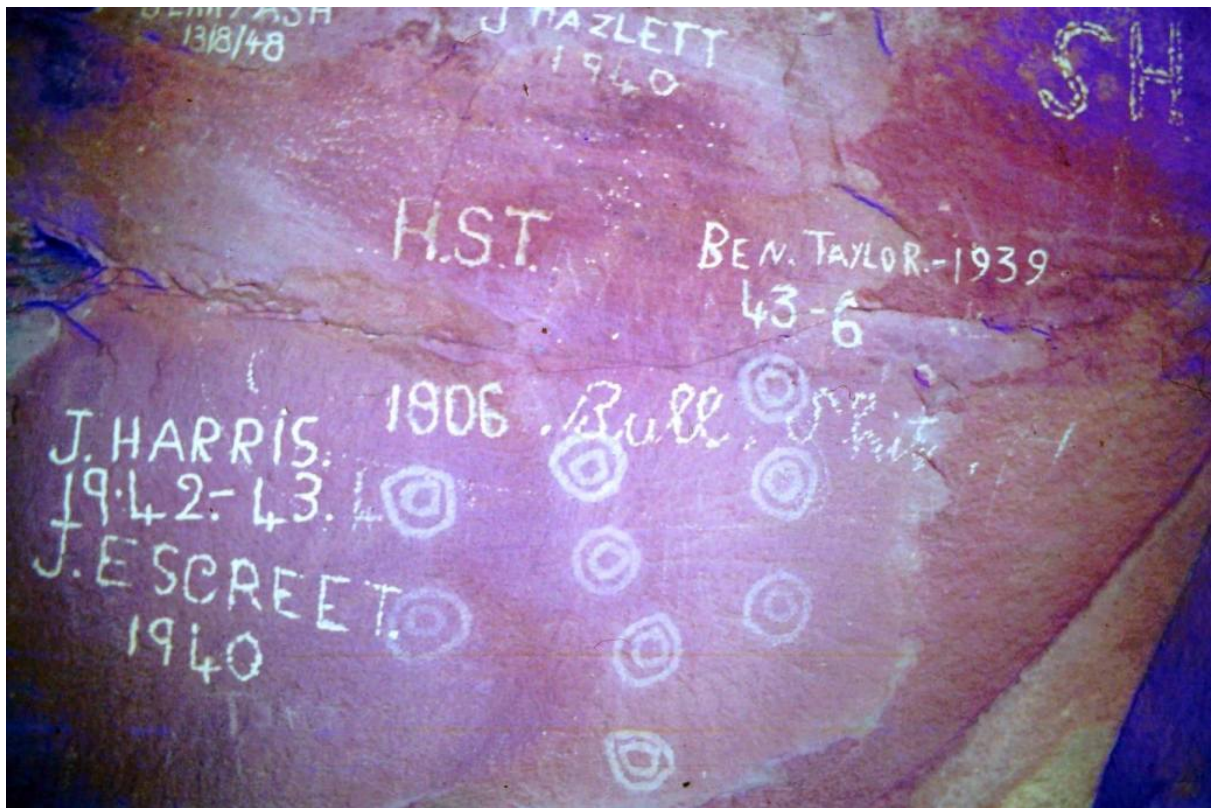
Noel contemplates a Biella Pool



A swim in Killagarra

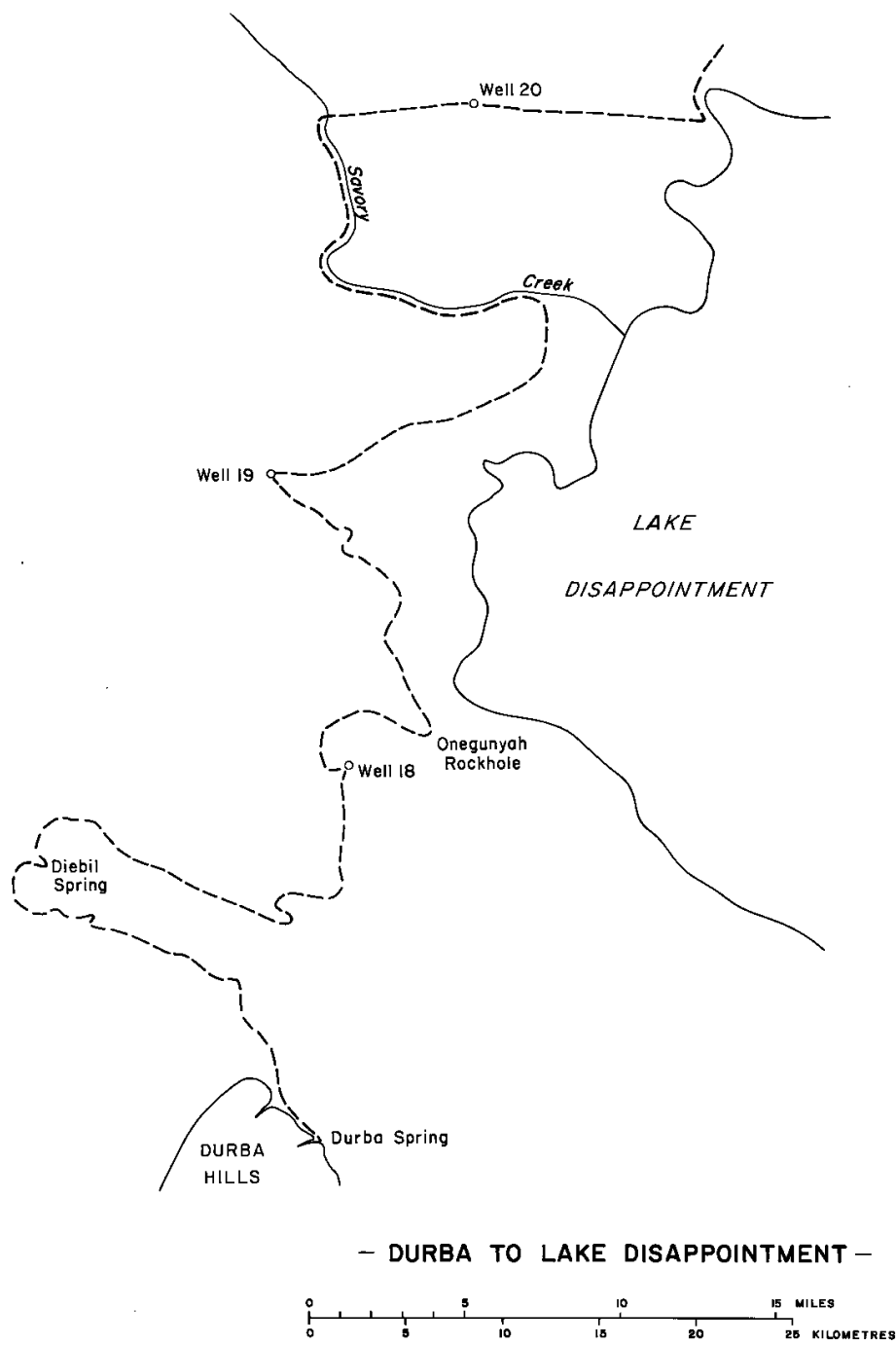


Durba Spring Pool



Names on the rock wall Durba 1967

CHAPTER 11



CHAPTER 11

Durba to Disappointment

There are some very big sandridges north of Durba Hills. It was our first real test. A direct confrontation with the dominant landform of the Canning Stock Route. Confident we could cross the ridges we welcomed the opportunity to prove ourselves and our vehicles.

Before setting out we planned a route. As the individual sand ridges are shown on the map, we plotted several courses through each section, utilising any gaps in the ridges pattern. Of course, these planned routes were often varied and, on occasions abandoned entirely, as we progressed. The map gave clues on which way to go, but the final decision on which ridges to cross and where to cross it, could only be made at the foot of the ridges in question.

Once we decided to cross we looked for a low point – often where the ridges branched or contained a loop. In the lead vehicle Chud would drive on what we called out inspection run.

The inspection run consisted of a slow approach, in second gear low-range, and a drive up the ridges almost as far as stalling point – the stalling point of the Land-Rover's engine.

Sometimes the stalling point was so far from the top of the ridge we elected to look for another crossing. Very rarely, we surprised ourselves and reached the top of the sandridge on our inspection run. However, we usually found the stalling point somewhere between these two extremes. In this case, Chud and I would leave the vehicle at the end of the inspection run and walk to the top of the ridge, clearing obstacles - dead trees and large spinifex clumps - in our path.

We returned to the vehicle and backed down to the foot of the ridge. After improving the approach, we tried again. This time we were fair dinkum. The run up was faster. Chud endeavoured to keep the engine rev's up. As the ascent began we both instinctively leaned forward, as if the shift in our body weights assisted the Land-Rover.

It can be an agonising moment as the vehicle nears the top. So close, but the motor is dying, we're nearly there, the momentum is gone, just a few more yards, we'll stall, no we'll make it, no, yes, no.

If no, I got out of the vehicle. Chud rolled back to the start of the run up and attacked again. This time, at the critical moment, I would move in and push. The combination of the extra weight behind the vehicle and the improved run-up (now in use for the third time), invariably led to success.

If not, we improved the track further by removing more momentum-consuming humps of spinifex. Noel now joined me to give the final push.

By the time the lead vehicle was over, the track was reasonably clear and, with Chud and I standing by to push, Noel usually made it at his first

or second try.

Although some sandridges gave us more problems than others, there is no one ridge that stands out in my memory as a particular terror. No single ridge is so long and so consistently high and steep that it cannot be driven across or around. The strength of the sandridges – like the strength of piranha fish or soldier ants or Zulu warriors - is in their numbers. One can be dealt with, but one after another after another ad infinitum is not so simple. The only reward for crossing a sandridge is a view of the next one in your path. Once again, the search for a low point, the inspection run ...

The slow progress can soon weary a man and the effect on a vehicle is equally damaging. The engine over-heats and the associated loss of power becomes painfully evident in the last few yards before the ridge crest.

As the expedition was our own, our vehicle refinements were minimal and frugal.

Our short-wheel base Land-Rovers - apart from the extra heavy duty springs and additional fuel tanks - were conventional. Our tyres were of the normal highway tread. We reduced the air-pressure as far as we dared and while this improved the vehicles' ability to cross ridges, it also increased the chances of staking a tyre.

We assisted the Land-Rovers' cooling systems by removing the thermostat and keeping the radiator clear. All we could do for a boiling vehicle was to park it facing into any available breeze, lift the bonnet and wait.

Crossing sandridges in a motor vehicle is hard, but crossing sandridges is the real challenge of the Canning Stock Route. The success of our expedition depended, primarily, on our ability to drive over ridges and, on the big ones north of Durba, we put that ability to the test - successfully.

We travelled across to Diebil Spring. As this included some westing, as well as northing, we were not continually crossing sandridges so our vehicles, and ourselves, did not become over-heated.

There are many rocky hill outcrops in the vicinity of Diebil. We drove to the one marked Diebil on our Gunanya 1:250 000 map (provisional) - another box canyon containing a water-course. Boulders, some the size of houses, had fallen from the cliffs on either side. White gums grew between them. We scrambled around the head of the canyon in search of the spring. We found only a small pool - beneath a jumble of massive rocks. We could hear a trickle of water so we concluded it to be Diebil.

We threaded our way through the surrounding hills. Sand and wind had carved grotesque figures and sound-shell shaped caves into the rock formations. Then we were back in the sandridge country. I headed for a high ridge I had seen last year - the highest, 200 feet, I had claimed.

The height of sandridges is a popular subject for discussion. Several people, including Chud and Henry Ward, doubted that a ridge could be as high

as 200 feet. I qualified my statement by stipulating that I estimated the height from the highest point on the ridge down to the lowest point in the valley between it and the next one. Still they doubted. I was confident enough to back my judgement with 20 cents.

We came to the ridge in question. I trusted Chud to do the surveying. After a couple of distance and angle measurements, Chud sat down to do the calculation. Anxiously, I looked over his shoulder. The result - 190 feet.

"Phew," said Chud, who hates losing money, "that was close."

"I haven't any money on me right now," I confessed.

"Don't worry about it now," said Chud, "but don't leave town."

"Tell you what. I'll shout you 20 cents worth of juke-box when we get to Halls Creek," I said.

"I don't know about that. Halls Creek is a long way up from here."

My wager was lost on an unusually high point of an exceptionally high ridge. The usual height of the bigger ridges is between fifty and one hundred feet while most vehicle crossings are less than fifty feet high.

The ridges are wind formed. Winds, consistently blowing in the one direction, across a flat surface in an area of high temperature produce secondary currents of air. These currents collect loose sand and deposit it in simple straight lines along the direction of the prevailing wind. In most of the Great Sandy Desert this direction is west north-west.

Further wind action on further available loose sand produces wider, rather than higher, sandridges. Continued action tends to divide the ridge forming double, triple or multiple crests. The sand creates loops and swirls which, when viewed from the air, give the ridge a chain-like appearance.

In areas of lower altitude, where the wind has more sand to play with, confused saucer-shaped ridges occur. From the air these look like a net.

On my Gunanya 1:250 000 map, I could see all these types of ridges and the various intermediate stages.

The next day we re-joined the wheel tracks I had made the previous year and followed them up to Well 18 which is on a wide spinifex plain with clusters of desert oaks on its western side. I found traces of horse manure and Noel found one of Canning's survey pegs marked "038". The pegs are very rare. Most have been used for fire wood by lazy axeman.

North-east of Well 18 we drove around a large, water-filled claypan and, at the foot of a terrace hill, we came to Onegunyah Rockhole. A water-course from the hill drops over a rocky ten foot cliff. A depression at the base of the cliff extends about twenty feet, forward and to either side, to form the rockhole.

Onegunyah is one of those spots in the desert that is out of tune with its surroundings. The grey exposed rock and adjacent vegetation - sustained by the water - gives Onegunyah a glade appearance. The variety of paintings and carvings on the rocks indicate that the aborigines regarded

the site with some reverence. A small fig tree was thriving on the western edge of the water.

The springs of Durba are exciting, invigorating - demanding of action. Solitary Onegunyah's appeal is passive, inspiring rest and repose.

But we had to press on.

Well 19, Kunanaggi, is in an area of confused sandridges. Many ridges, with twists and turns and no pattern, induced me to direct Chud in the general direction and hope for the best. So, when we drove straight up to the well, it was good luck rather than good management.

Bottles and rusting tins were strewn around the area. The remains of what looked like an old sulky required inspection and photographic recording. I saw a couple of rabbit burrows.

Well 19 is one of the wells I had not seen before as it lay about three miles west of last year's traverse line. Now we turned east to re-join the traverse. I relaxed in the Land-Rover, confident of recognising my old tracks when I came to them. I day-dreamed through three miles, then another mile. No track. Five miles from the well I stopped Chud and got out of the vehicle and searched on foot.

I found the track. I had allowed Chud to steer too far north. We had been travelling parallel to it for the last two miles. Slightly peeved at this error, I repeated what I had told Chud and Noel when we first spoke of the trip.

"Navigating in the desert is a full-time job. Never relax or miss an opportunity to check your position. Even if you're quite sure you know where you are."

"You're telling me?" said Chud.

Re-assured to be back on the old track, we made camp.

"Are we on the stock route now?" asked Noel.

Noel appeared concerned so I explained - with the maps.

"Look, the stock route on the 1:250 000 map is this line going from well to well. But look here on Canning's map. It shows the stock-route as a reserve five miles wide, meandering from well to well to include areas of good feed for cattle. I'm not too worried about sticking to either of these routes. I'll aim to hit every well but in between I'll be looking for easier going - like sections of this track. We'll be turning off to see other points of interest. So, while we may not always be on the stock-route, we'll never be too far off it. Okay?"

Noel appeared satisfied.

On this, our fifth night out from Glen-Ayle, we began a check on our supplies of the two essential items of travel - fuel and food. Chud and I, steeped in public service tradition, called the process "revision of estimates." We managed to make the simple process quite complicated and never obtained the same answer twice.

The calculation involved many variables. Our estimate of the length of the

Canning Stock Route, the distance we had travelled, the distance we still had to travel, the amount of fuel we had used so far, the amount of fuel we still had at our disposal, our estimate of the number of days we needed to drive the stock route, the number of days since we left Glen-Ayle and the amount of food we had consumed during those days.

From these quantities we sought to determine if we had enough fuel and food to enable us to reach Hall's Creek.

Like good public servants we pored over our assumptions and arithmetic. Were our original estimates accurate? What were the proportions of sandridge country to clear, stony country? How did the difference in country affect our rate of travel? Did we allow for sufficient delays? Would Frank come out to Well 33? Could we rely on supplementing our food supply with live game?

We chewed biros and wasted paper without ever reaching a conclusion we were confident enough to believe in. However, like good public servants, we persevered. We continued to try and make sense of an over-supply of inconsistent information. We worried by degrees - set according to the results of each new estimate - and pressed on regardless, doggedly, even bravely.

We came to the banks of the Savory Creek.

The Savory Creek rises in the hills west of Mundiwindi and winds its way east through three hundred miles of sandridges to dissipate in the white waste of Lake Disappointment. The Canning Stock Route crosses the creek near its entry to the lake. At this point the Savory consisted of a narrow channel of water flowing down the centre of a strip of salt about 200 feet wide.

The salt impregnates everything. Crystals of it glistened on clumps of spinifex growing close to the creek. I washed in the water and after drying myself white particles of salt gave my skin a ghostly hue. Later in the day we boiled potatoes in the water. The potatoes floated.

The recent rains around Mundiwindi and along the Savory's course had so increased the volume of water in it that we could not cross at the position indicated on the map. We turned left - west or upstream - to look for a crossing.

The wide salty banks gave way to steep sandy ones: still impossible to negotiate in a Land-Rover. The creek's course turned from west to north. We followed it up to the latitude of Well 20. Here we crossed and headed east into an area of small, confused sandridges to look for Well 20.

On the map these ridges were represented by small, wriggly lines containing all the characteristics of Pitman's shorthand symbols. It looked daunting. But I soon discovered that by travelling slowly and paying close attention to the map, I could find my way through the wriggles. After six twisting miles, we drove through a ridge gap and there before us was Well 20 - exactly where the map proclaimed it to be.

"There you are." Proudly, I pointed to the well.

"Right on," said Chud.

I felt pleased with myself. I had located the well without any walking, in the centre of an area of maze-like sandridges.

I marked our mileage on the map. "This is a good map," I thought. I thought more about it. I had merely used the map to find the well. Small credit there. The real credit lay with the people who had supplied the information and compiled the map. Canning, with his description of the well's locality and his astro-fix. The National Mapping men in Melbourne who had fixed this data in the pattern of sandridges derived from the aerial photographs.

My successful use of the map was a compliment to the work of the men who made it.

We found Well 20 in good condition. The railing around it stood intact and firm. The troughing was good, although the whip pole was loose and would soon fall. The water in the bottom of the well was a dirty brown. John Baird, a drover whose name I had seen on the roll of honour at Durba, blazed a tree here and carved his name and the year on it: "1941."

From Well 20 we drove back to the edge of Lake Disappointment. We made camp among some desert oaks close to the lake and walked onto its surface for a photographic session.

Frank Hann gave the name Disappointment to the lake. He experienced disappointment when he found it to be salty.

Frank Hann worked on stations in Queensland. The droughts and recession of the 1890's forced him to walk off his property, Lawn Hill, and for several years he explored in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. He moved south to live in Perth then, at the age of 57, he began a career as an explorer-pro prospector with the Western Australian government. He made a number of expeditions into the desert country east and north of Laverton. East, as far as Oodnadatta in South Australia and north, to the shores of Lake Disappointment.

Disappointment. I like the name. We stood on the surface of the lake and gazed at the limitless whiteness stretching away to blueness on an indistinct horizon. A cool breeze, pungent with salt, blew my hat off. It rolled across the empty flatness. Pausing upright, tumbling onwards to pause again, upside down, then on again. I ambled after it. No need to hurry. There was no place the runaway hat could blow to. No surface feature, no hills or hollows, no change of grade, nothing, sterile nothing. An enormous non-feature.

We took some photos and walked back to the Land-Rovers. Chud prepared some salmon patties for tea.

Throughout the trip, Chud, Noel and myself shared the cooking duties. We adhered to no strict routine or division of culinary tasks. Each contributed whatever cooking skills he had. Consequently, there was a variety in our meals that would not have occurred had one of us assumed the role of cook on his own. There was even variety in our failures. The meals were not always

expertly prepared, but they were never boring.

After the patties, I made some custard. It was too runny. Chud boiled some rice. It was claggy. However, the combination of runny custard and claggy rice made a tasty dessert.

"Custard's always dicey." I tried to justify my failure. "I usually make double custard mix so that when I come to add it to the boiling milk, I can just keep adding until it comes to the right thickness. That way I never run short."

"Well, what went wrong tonight?" asked Chud.

"I made a blue with my quantities. I made half the mix instead of double. Or maybe I had too much milk in the saucepan. Maybe I knew your rice would be too thick. Anyhow, what's the recipe for this rice?"

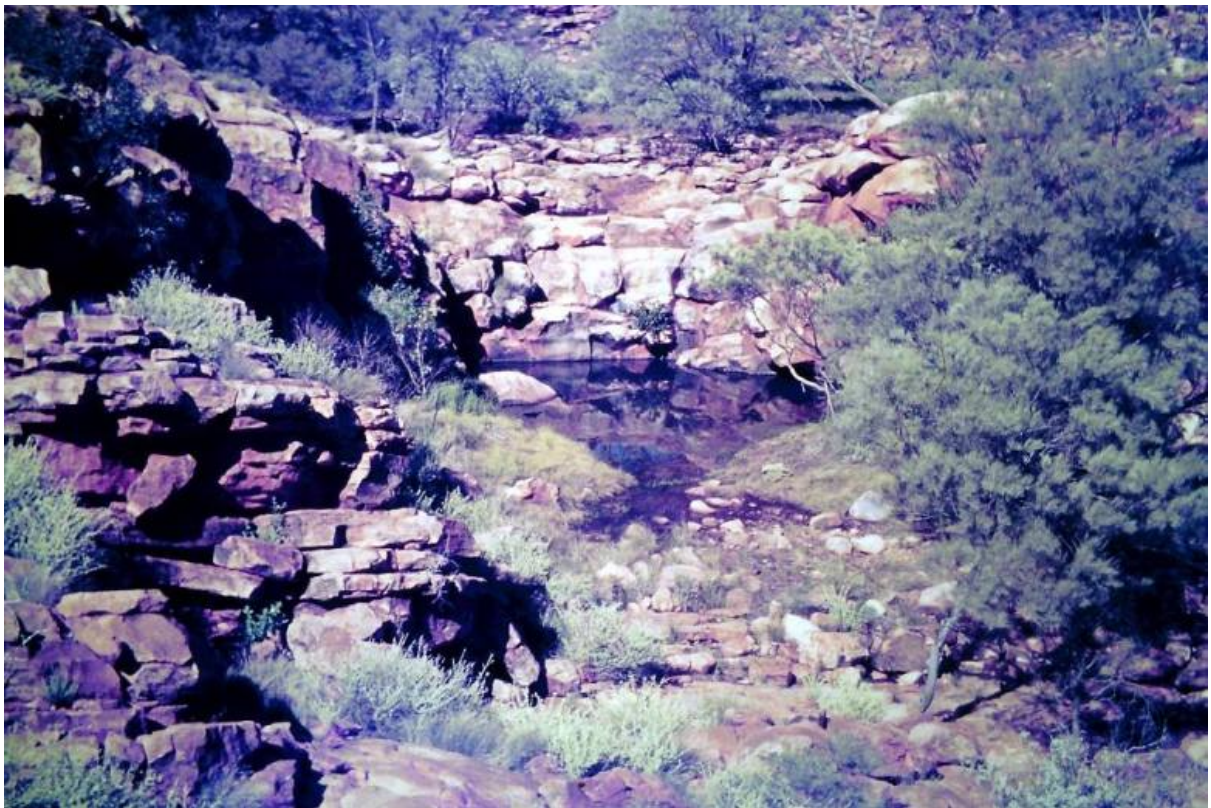
Chud continued eating, looking at me, trying to think of an answer.

Finally he said, "Aw, I just put the rice in water and boil Christ out of it."

"I see. I must remember that. I don't reckon I'll ever read those instructions in a recipe book," I told him.



Diebel Rocks



Onegunyah rockhole

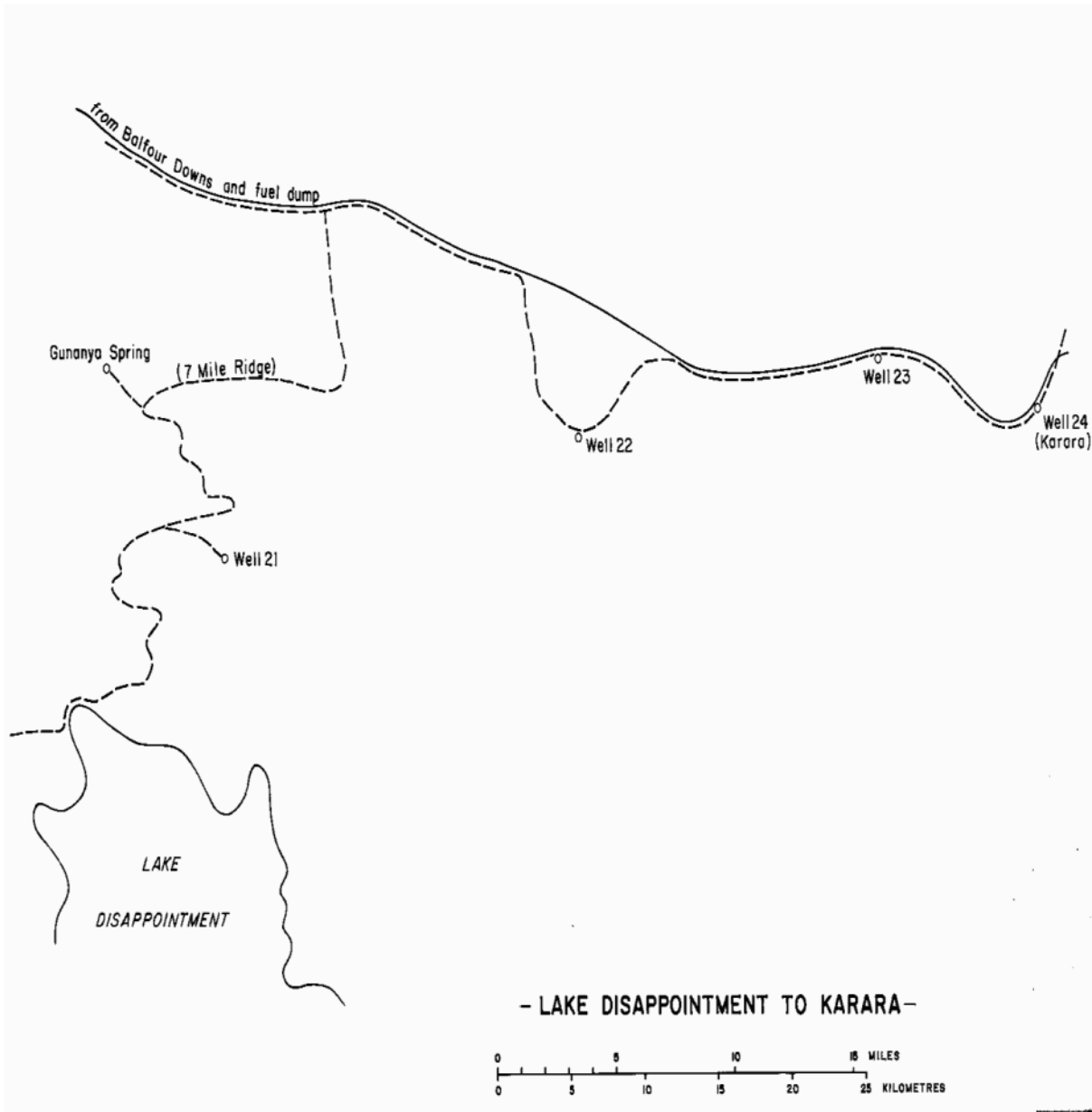


Well 20



Lake Disappointment saltbush

CHAPTER 12



CHAPTER 12

Disappointment to Karara

We followed the track north but had to leave it and cross a couple of big ridges to get to the map position of Well 21. We sat on the high point of a ridge and, through our binoculars, searched for the well in the country below.

Chud and I searched quickly, moving our field of view impatiently onwards. Noel was slower and more systematic. He began at the base of the next sandridge and worked his way painstakingly through the spinifex to the base of the ridge we were on. He sighted Well 21 first.

Through his binoculars he picked out no more than two feet of the remains of the black windlass metal showing above the low bush around the well. The troughing timber and other above-surface construction were gone. The well contained stagnant water.

At lunchtime we set up our portable Traegar and tuned in to the Port Hedland schedule. Mac, at Warrawagine, had promised to listen out for us during July. At the end of the official telegrams, Chud picked up the mouthpiece and began.

"9WHE portable to 8SH Warrawagine. Do you read Mac?"

Silence.

Then, from the void of the desert air, transformed – as if by magic – through the transceiver came:

"Hullo there Chud. How are you boys getting on?"

I felt like throwing my hat in the air. Chud and Noel grinned. A voice from the past. Contact with the outside world. Chud was excited. He had trouble getting his answer in order.

"Er ... great, Mac. Great. Yes. Well, we've just passed 21 and should reach our first fuel dump tomorrow."

"That's good. Not too much water out there for you?"

"No, it's OK. Good, in fact. Plenty of surface water but not too widespread. We had to detour around Savory Creek though. Listen Mac, d'you know if Bidge's coming out to meet us at Well 33?"

"Yeah, I think he is. They start shearing soon, but he still reckons he's going out."

"Gee, that'll be great if he does. Anyhow, Mac, I'll leave it at that for now. Good to hear from you. I'll call up again in a couple of days and let you know when we expect to be at Well 33 so you can let Bidge know, OK?"

"Yeah. Sure Chud. See you then."

"Yeah, see you then and thanks."

Chud put down the mouthpiece. "Well," he said, "it's good to know we're not entirely on our own, isn't it?"

"Yes. But you should have asked him how Manly was going," I

suggested.

"Bugger Manly. We've got more to worry about than that team of drongos. Mac wouldn't even know who they are. It'll be great if old Bidge comes out to 33." Almost lovingly, he patted the Traeger with the palm of his hand. "Yes, it's good to know we can get through on this thing, eh?"

It was. And yet, since leaving Glen-Ayle one of our favourite conversations consisted of assertions that the real charm of the Canning Stock Route was its isolation. With no residents or fellow travellers to bother us, we claimed to enjoy the simple, uncomplicated style of travel we had adopted. We took pride in our rapidly developing self-reliance. We needed no help. We thumbed our noses at the rest of civilisation. Who needed it? Certainly not us.

And yet, after a brief exchange of words with a taciturn cattleman - hundreds of miles away - Chud, Noel and myself chattered and giggled like excited schoolgirls. We went over every word of Chud's conversation with Mac, searching for any extra meaning we may have missed. We were overjoyed to have made contact with another human being. We looked forward to the prospect of more contact if Bidge came to Well 33.

We would have made poor hermits. Our gregarious natures had found us out.

After Well 21 we headed north, away from the stock route, to find the drum of petrol Chud and I had delivered on our boggy trip out from Balfour Downs.

We visited Gunanya Spring on the south-east corner of the McKay Range. We found large pools and, as none of us had washed since Durba, we lay awhile in the cool water. Re-freshed, we returned to the vehicles and, in the afternoon warmth, began a seven mile drive down a narrow valley formed by two ridges. It was a slow, bumpy drive with no tracks to follow and no navigating to do until we reached the end of the ridge on our left.

I sat in the Land-Rover in my favourite travelling position: left arm resting on the window sill - elbow out the window, left foot on the rim of the glove box in front of me, right foot firmly planted on the floor and right hand holding the top of the dashboard. In this position my body effectively cushioned most of the swaying and bumping motion of the Land- Rover as it crossed the spinifex.

"Tell me when the end of this ridge comes up, will you Chud? I'm tired."

Chud looked doubtful. "You sure it'll be okay? Don't want to let you get geographically embarrassed again. Do we?"

"She'll be right, mate."

I dozed a little and thought about old times. Not recent years, but childhood - family and friends. Back to my earliest memories. Walking on quiet beaches with my big sister.

There is something about the desert that induces me to indulge in

long sessions of contemplation of my own life. Whether it is the lack of other forms of consciousness (Chud and Noel excepted) in so vast an amphitheatre or simply an absence of distractions that allows me to look inwards and backwards, I'm not sure. But, in the desert, during these periods of enlightened retrospection, I discovered many truths about myself and my life.

"There she is." Chud nodded towards the end of the ridge. We now had a clear run north - only one ridge to cross - to the road out from Balfour Downs and our drum of petrol. It was after five. We were all tired. We camped. No one had much to say.

I moved as in a daze. Still occupied with the nature of my childhood. Mine. Exclusively mine. I treasured the fine, interlocking details. The blazing moments of action. The delicate shadows of feeling. My big sister.

I neglected Thomas Hardy. His characters, with their complicated motives and emotions, were artificial compared to my own. Mine were real. Precise and so intimate.

After tea I lay on my back in the swag and watched the Cross swing over, dragging the Pointers and the Southern Hemisphere with it.

My parents had friends on a farm. We kids didn't like them. They had no children. But Mum and Dad insisted we go. There was nothing to do. "Don't go near the long grass children." Young Stan was taking his first steps. He fell over and cut his chin. Big sister and I got into trouble. Tea lasted for ages. Then more drinks for the grown-ups. Big sister and I started to quarrel. At last, time to go. More talk while we sat in the car. Waiting to go. Finally, off. The headlights of our old Morris probed the darkness. Tall trees leaned over the road. Marg and I began to sing, our quarrel forgotten. Skiffle music was popular then. Our faces against the window, we sang together, staring out into the bush. I wanted the journey to last forever. We kept coming back to the same song. We didn't know many of the words so we kept repeating those we knew. The lights of town. Nearly home. The car splutters. "Oh, oh," says Dad, "petrol. Quick you singers, out and push." Marg and I jump out, still singing. On the slight downhill run to our house the car gets going again. Marg and I left behind. Laughing. Together. We dawdle home. Alone. Together. Singing.

"Freight train, freight train, goin' so fast.

Freight train, freight train, life is past.

I don't know which train I'm on.

Only know I'm - goin' home."

Later that week, Marg went to live in Sydney and work at the office of the Perpetual Trustee Company. We lived in a small town - few opportunities. Marg had her Leaving Certificate.

Our family was never the same.

In the morning my mood had returned to one of action. We crossed

the solitary ridge, drove onto the track, covered the twenty odd miles back to our drum of petrol and transferred its contents to our vehicles. We had only travelled a couple of miles on our way back to the stock route, when I saw, loping along the track in front of us, two camels.

Quickly, I climbed onto the bonnet of the Land-Rover with my camera. Chud drove up behind them. They continued to clomp along the track in front of us. Viewed from behind, the camels looked clumsy and awkward - like someone running in gum-boots. As we gained on them, their unpleasant body odours reached me. Ribbons of saliva hung from their mouths. I took several photographs. Chud ventured closer. Too close. Suddenly, the bull led his cow off the track. In the spinifex and sand the camels soon left us behind.

Noel came up behind us.

"Fantastic," I told him. "I've finally seen some camels. And what's more, I reckon I've got some good photos."

"Good," said Chud. Then, gazing in the direction of the disappearing camels, he added, "If my old shooting mate, Anderson, was here with us now, we'd have two dead camels on our hands."

Did I detect a note of the old exasperation of Chud the hunter in his voice?

He gained some relief later in the morning. We came upon two turkeys and, using his shotgun, he dispatched them both.

"Tonight we feast," I shouted back at Noel.

We drove around a prominent hill, south of the track, to Well 22. From Well 22 it was an easy drive up to Well 23 and from Well 23, we followed the track to Well 24.

I had visited these three wells the previous year. They are close to the track, easy to find and many people have seen them. For these reasons they held no great interest for us. We gave them each a cursory, obligatory inspection.

Well 22 is beside a big sandridge. There was evidence of an old army camp nearby and I suspect the soldiers re-conditioned the well while they were in residence.

Well 23 was salty and only a few yards off the track.

Well 24, Karara, lies in a clearly defined water-course with low, red cliffs behind it. As usual, we walked over to the well, lifted the cover and looked down. However, it was not what we saw that made the lasting impression - rather it was what we smelled. Ugh. An animal of some kind had drowned in Karara recently. The dirty black water in the well reeked of decomposition. We did not stay long.

From Glen-Ayle to this well, I had travelled familiar ground. Familiar, in that last year's survey traverse - with bench marks every three to five miles - connected the two points. Although the traverse followed a more direct line, it

was never very far from the stock route, so it provided us with a measure of security. We saw evidence - wheel tracks and bogs - of another party having used the traverse track already.

On the next stage, from Well 24 to Well 33, there was no traverse. We had no record of a motor vehicle ever having crossed this section. So, while we felt a sense of achievement on reaching Well 24 and completing another stage safely, our exhilaration was tempered by the knowledge that on the next stage - up to Well 33 - we were on our own.

We camped on a stony rise, clear of spinifex but with plenty of firewood. I dug a hole in the ground - to be our oven - while Chud and Noel each plucked a turkey. I prepared hot coals. Chud crammed the turkeys into his cast-iron camp oven which we then placed in our ground oven which now contained the hot coals. As we waited for the meal to cook we drank rum.

Henry Ward once told me, "Never go into the bush without a bottle of rum." Advice I gladly accepted. I had brought along a small bottle of O.P. To celebrate our progress to date, I opened the bottle. I poured one third of its contents into my cup. I transferred one third of this amount of rum into Chud's cup and another third into Noel's cup. We each added water to suit our individual tastes. I sat on my stretcher with my back against my unrolled swag. Chud and Noel squatted beside the fire. The conversation turned to camels.

"I thought you would've seen plenty of camels last year," said Noel.

"No," I replied. "I saw plenty of tracks but no camels. We were close sometimes, real close. Like the night we camped on a claypan just south of here. Gee, I laughed, it was like this. Greg and Clyde were with me and they were always complaining about each other's snoring. Each morning they would be into it. Like, 'Hell, you were out to it last night,' Greg would say."

"'No way,' Clyde would answer. 'With your bloody buzz saw of a nose going all night, I hardly closed my eyes.' Well, the morning after the night on the claypan they were rubbishing each other as usual. As I moved around to get some wood for the fire, I saw camel tracks that hadn't been there last night. The hoof prints were quite clear. Two camels had come on to the claypan during the night. From the tracks I could see where they had stood and looked at us before moving off. I showed the tracks to Greg and Clyde - only a few feet from their swags. There was no more talk of insomnia. 'Christ,' said Greg, 'how'd a bloke be, waking up in the middle of the night to see a great bloody f--- head starin' down at you.'"

"F--- head?" asked Noel.

"Yes. Greg called camels f--- heads. He reckoned their heads were all f---d up."

Noel laughed. "It's true though. They are a crazy lookin' animal, aren't they?"

Chud came to the camel's defence. "Sure, when you see them in a pit at the zoo or chase them along a track, they don't come up too well. But I've seen pictures of great convoys of camels carting all kinds of gear over desert country and they look pretty fine then."

I gave Chud and Noel the benefit of my research.

"And Giles and Warburton didn't worry too much about their camels looking ugly. They had nothing but praise for them. They knew their lives depended on them. Warburton had to eat his. Later explorers like Carnegie, Frank Hann, Madigan, Colson and David Lindsay - blokes who really knew about camels - they loved them. But it wasn't just the explorers. What about prospectors, fencers, police and carters? They all used camels. Camels helped build the Overland Telegraph Line and the railway across the Nullabor. And surveyors too. Remember Canning used camels along here." I waved my arm at the gathering desert darkness. "You know, the only blokes I've heard rubbish camels were a few cattlemen."

Chud knew why. "That's because they treated them like horses and the camels didn't respond like horses. They're not as keen on man as horses are. Not so easily dominated or trained. Some people call it stubborn or downright mean, but blokes who really know them, like old Barker, call it character. They respect it."

"Old Barker?" I asked.

"Yes, Barker. He wrote *Camels of the Outback*. I told you about it last year. Didn't you get around to reading it?"

"Er ... no."

Chud was pleased to have read something I hadn't. He spoke confidently.

"It's a great little book. There wasn't much old Barker didn't know about camels. Right from the beginning. The Vic's brought the first camel team into Australia for Burke and Wills, you know. Like Burke and Wills the camels never made it back. Then a guy named Thomas Elder, who ran a big station in South Australia, brought a real big mob in. Over a hundred. He sold them to the government building the Overland Telegraph Line up through the centre."

I knew about Thomas Elder, so I was able to interrupt. "Not all of them mate. Elder was the guy who supplied Giles and Warburton with camels. Others too, I s'pose."

"Right," said Chud and, raising his voice slightly, to assert his superior knowledge, he went on, "From Elders' camels bred an animal more suitable to Australian conditions. Old Barker knew it all. He was a carrier in the Pilbara - using camels. He went right out into the back blocks with his teams. He was eventually put out of business by the first trucks."

"When would that have been?" I asked.

"Nineteen twenties."

"So, from the 1870s, when explorers began using camels, right through to the 1920s, when motor vehicles showed up, I guess camels were the standard

form of transport in Central Australia. That's more than fifty years."

Chud was inclined to give them more than fifty."

"Don't forget Colson and Madigan were using camels in the Simpson Desert in the late thirties. I reckon there'd be others too. Still using them in country like this."

Silence, as we looked around at the country.

"We'd be a nice pair of bastards," I said to Chud. "Frightening hell out of a couple of old camels along a desert track. Like if it wasn't for camels, this stock route would never have been built. We wouldn't even be out here. When you think about it, we're only doing with motor vehicles - for the first time - what camels could've done any time since the 1870s, aren't we?"

Noel stood up. Having spoken the least, his cup of rum and water had emptied first.

"Why only the 1870s?" he said. "If camels had been here a couple of thousand years ago or even further back, they could've made this little jaunt we're making such a big deal about, without batting an eye."

Chud and I nodded, humbly. I drank the last of my rum.

"Those turkeys are starting to smell good. What d'you reckon? Is it tucker time yet?"



Chud and Noel top up on water

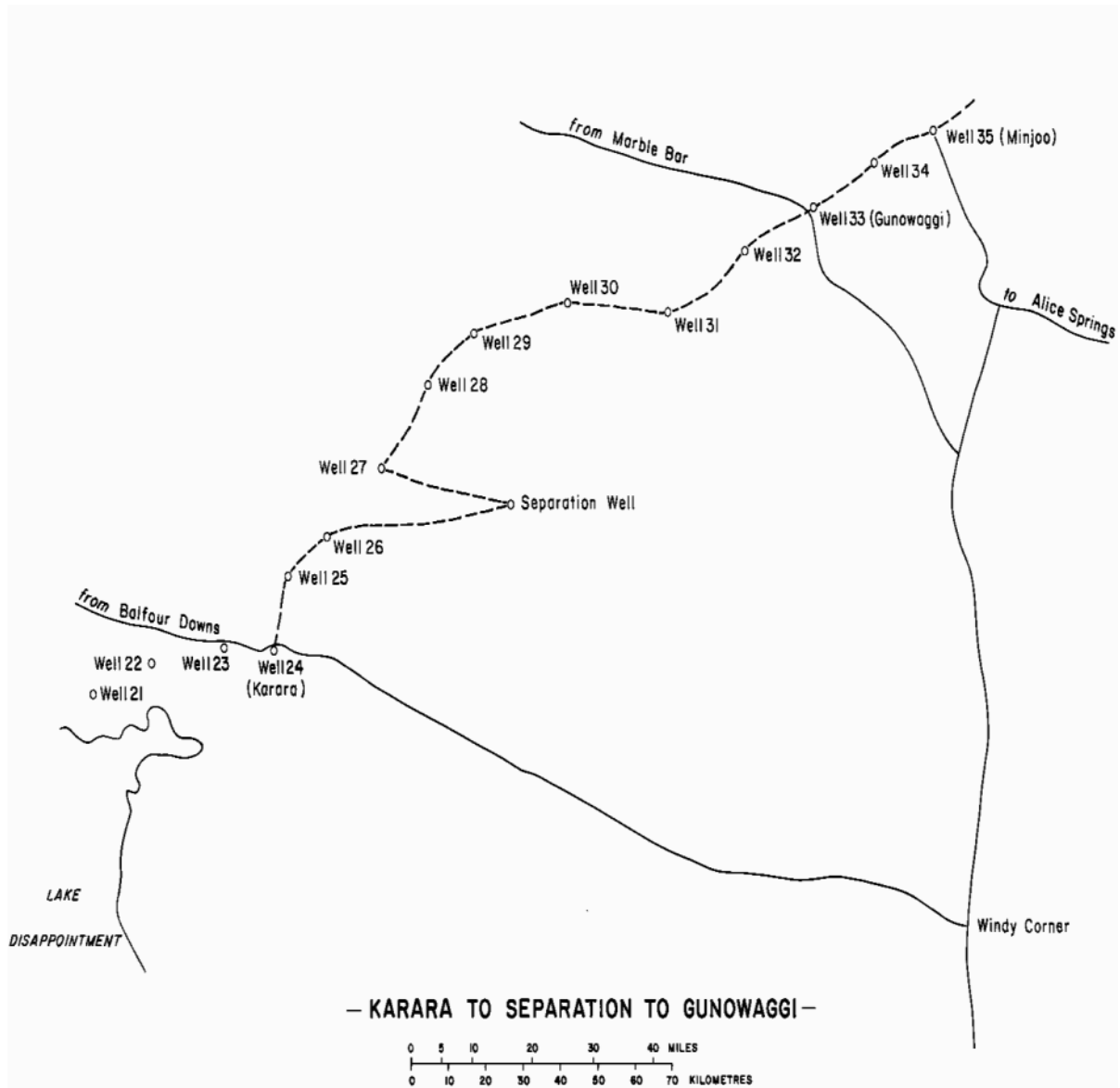


Well 22



Chasing camels

CHAPTER 13



CHAPTER 13

Karara to Separation

On July the 25th we drove off Beadell's Balfour Downs-Windy Corner road. I estimated the next track we would see was 200 miles ahead. As we tried to drive north an aimlessly wandering water-course hindered our progress. Each time we detoured or crossed it I said, "Right, now we're into the clear going." However, the capricious creek, uselessly dry, wound back to block us again and again. "Hell, we're here to cross sandridges not bloody creek-beds," exclaimed Chud, thumping his hand on the base of the steering wheel.

Eventually we reached the sandridges. The creek had disappeared. This point marked the end of an area of good grazing land which extends from Well 23 to the first ridges north of Well 24.

We found Well 25 in a group of claypans. It was almost filled with sand. Chud lowered himself into the well and stood on the sand. Only his head and shoulders showed above the surface. He, obligingly, removed his hat and waved it at Noel and myself. Our photographs of Well 25 featured Chud's boyish face, smiling out from the rotting timbers of the well.

We stopped for lunch on the next sandridge, set up the Traeger and ate well of the turkey as we waited for the Flying Doctor schedule to finish. It was a long one. Then we had to wait another half hour as the mining boss at Woodie Woodie spoke to his several outcamps. When he had finished issuing instructions, we could not raise Mac at Warrawagine.

In the afternoon heat we came to some big sandridges. I directed Chud to steer a couple of miles north of the map position of the stock route. The Tabletop 1:250 000 sheet showed a gap in the ridge pattern at that point. I hoped to drive through it.

"Better to go around than over," I said to Chud.

He coughed loudly, unnaturally.

After travelling a couple of miles the ridges continued as steep and as unbroken as ever.

I couldn't work it out. "We'd better cross," I decided. "We're getting too far out of our way. Maybe this isn't the ridge I think it is."

We crossed and saw before us another big ridge - steep and unbroken. We crossed it and then another. Still no gap.

"What's goin' on? According to my dead-reckoning we've come far enough. We should be in the bloody gap. Pull up. Have a look at this. See what you reckon. It's got me stuffed," I said to Chud.

Noel joined us. I spread the map out and pointed to the position of Well 25. "Everything was okay there. Now we come up here one and a half miles,

turn north and do another mile. See? And that should put us in this gap."

Chud and Noel agreed with my deductions. We all stared at the map and then looked at the high ridges on either side of the one we were on.

"Something's upta cack," said Noel.

"Yes, but what?" said Chud.

"Well I reckon if we keep going on we'll be way north of 26. There's only one way to sort this out properly. You know what that is, don't you?"

I looked Chud in the eye. He knew.

Astro-fix. I welcomed the opportunity to test the backyard training we had done at home. Would our ability, proven in town, under no strain, be as strong in the desert where we really needed to be able to determine our position?

We made camp. I unpacked the astronomy gear. The theodolite and tripod, the lighting equipment, the radio, the stopwatch, the books of mathematical tables, the text books and the proformas to guide us through the calculations. Everything was in order.

Nervously we ate tea. Turkey meat gave the stew some body. My custard thickened nicely. "I hope you do as well with the astro," said Noel.

Before we could begin the observations we had to decide which stars to observe and work out their approximate position in the sky. *The Apparent Places of Fundamental Stars* provided information on suitable stars and by applying approximate values of our latitude and longitude to this information, I worked out which part of the sky held the stars I had selected. Now I needed the direction of true north, quite accurately, so I could look for the stars.

In the Northern Hemisphere this presents no problem. The North Star, bright and easily recognisable, is placed, presumably by the grace of God, close to above the North Pole. In this position, the North Star is due north of any one who can see it.

When European man ventured "down under" and the North Star disappeared below the horizon, he discovered that God, in his wisdom, had not placed a South Star above the South Pole - not one that man could see with his naked eye.

As if to complicate, or even deter, navigation in southern latitudes, man needs a telescope (or theodolite) to find a tiny, insignificant star (in a group of several similar ones) which can quickly give the direction of south. This star is called Sigma Octantis. Through my involvement with this stellar body over the years, I have come to know it as Miss Sigma Octantis.

Many times she has eluded me. Many times I have found her only to lose her. Many times I have believed I had found her only to learn I was gazing at one of her close friends. Too many nights have I spent in contemplation of her and today, she remains as unattainable as when I first made her acquaintance.

In the desert, I quickly found her - she would not play me false out here. If you have a theodolite, Miss Sigma is the key to the sky. Once I identified

her I could locate any star I chose.

Our nights of practice proved well-spent. Confidently and systematically we made our observations. Myself at the theodolite, Chud booking and recording the time. Then we changed jobs. Chud read the angles and I booked the results.

We breezed through the calculations and plotted the resultant latitude and longitude on our 1:250 000 map.

"Well, that's exactly where I reckon we are by plotting our course up from Well 25 by dead reckoning," I announced to Chud and Noel.

"Okay. Then why didn't we find the gap in the ridges?" Chud's question remained unaltered.

He scratched his head. Chud's style of head scratching is not slow and contemplative. He vigorously digs all four fingers into the side of his head, showing himself no mercy. I feared for the safety of his scalp.

I shifted my gaze from Chud's nimble fingers back to the map.

The penny dropped. "That's it," I exclaimed. "Show me that biro." Chud and Noel watched, expectantly.

I joined the ends of the ridges either side of the gap.

"See. There is no gap. Some draftsman's left this gap by mistake. It doesn't exist at all. The map's wrong."

Now that there were two more sandridges on the map, Chud's ridge count agreed with the map. It all fitted perfectly.

"Right. Tomorrow morning we go back over the last two ridges, drive south-east a mile or so and we'll come to well 26. Betcha two bob."

There were no takers.

The discovery of the map error excited me more than any of the well discoveries we had made to date. I stood with my back to the fire and gazed up at the sky. The southern sky. The Southern Cross.

Unreasonably, I resent inhabitants of other countries in the Southern Hemisphere claiming that the Southern Cross reminds them of their homeland. It cannot be. For me the Cross is Australia.

I love the story of Australian soldiers travelling home from the Middle East during World War II. They were not sure they were sailing south until they saw the Southern Cross rise up from the ocean. Manly cheers ran around the deck of the troop-carrier.

Similarly, whenever I'm in northern Australia, I anxiously search the northern horizon for a glimpse of the Great Bear, or Big Dipper. This pleasure, denied me in south-east New South Wales, gives me visible proof that I am in the tropics.

In the desert at night, the sky dominates the scene like a large television set in a small room. As we yarned around the camp-fire each evening, we rarely looked at each other. Our eyes were invariably drawn skywards and held by "the wondrous glory of the everlasting stars."

The absence of outside artificial lighting in the desert allowed the heavens to display the "wondrous glory" to its fullest extent. The myriad of tiny points of light bring life to the constellations and, in some cases, it's even possible to make out the signs of the zodiac and a few of the characters of mythology said to be portrayed by groups of stars.

The scorpion threatens, Orion (the hunter) strides on purposefully while Eridanus (the river) winds its way down to Achernar. Only in the desert sky have I recognised the shape of the scales of Libra.

In my swag, too tired to read but not tired enough to sleep, I lay on my back with my hands crossed on my chest and roved around the sky. As I moved from group to group I mouthed the names of those I knew - like calling a roll. I have my favourites: the giant "A" of Taurus guarding the sisters of Pleiades, the delicate arc of Corona Australis, Formalhaut in the heart of the fish. Beauty, serene and inviolate. Inviolable? No, not quite. Dashing among my ancient friends came cheeky satellites. Creations of man showing no respect for the infinite. The twentieth century mania for mass-communication disturbed my contemplation of the ancients.

Even the planets I regard with some suspicion. Their non-twinkling brightness and erratic movement through the constellations is garish and inconsistent compared to the reliability and accuracy of the stars.

On the stock-route, I became so familiar with the stars that whenever I woke at night, I could tell, by the position of the Cross and the Pointers, how long it was till dawn. Not as a period of time measured in hours and minutes, but rather an understanding of time. An indefinable abstract quantity. Something as vague, yet definite, as the aborigines' little longa time, longa time or big longa time. With this knowledge, I could go back to sleep, confident of waking at first light.

I appreciate the stars for both their aesthetic and geometrical qualities. Their very infiniteness makes them so precise. A source of wonder for dreamer and mathematician alike.

After breakfast we crossed back over the two ridges - newly drawn on our map. We proceeded south-east beside the second one and came to Well 26. The fact that we had experienced some difficulty in locating this well increased the pleasure and satisfaction we derived from finding it. We talked of our achievement rather than the well.

Heading north-east again, we came to an outcrop of hills that formed sufficient catchment to fill several claypans at their base. The bright red water tasted like tank water. I washed my legs and endured a shave - my first since Durba. At lunchtime we set up the Traeger but, once again, Mac was not at home.

After the clear country around the claypans we crossed four big ridges and had no trouble finding Well 27: no troughing but some water. We made a quick

review of our petrol and food. Yes, we had enough of both to make a ten to twenty mile diversion from the Canning Stock Route to look for Separation Well. Separation: the focal point of a tragedy in the Great Sandy Desert.

The main actor in the drama of Separation Well was surveyor, Lawrence Wells. He worked for the South Australian government and first encountered the harsh realities of the outback while surveying the western borders of Queensland and New South Wales. He travelled with the Elder Exploration Expedition from central Australia to Kalgoorlie, trying to fill in the substantial blank between the explorations of Giles and Forrest. In 1892, on the second part of this expedition, Wells ventured into the country around Lake Way and Wiluna.

Even after the Elder expedition, there still remained large areas of unexplored land between the Overland Telegraph Line and the settled districts of Western Australia. Albert Frederick Calvert, a wealthy young Englishman, decided to finance an expedition to fill in some of the gaps.

In 1896 Wells led the Calvert Exploring Expedition north from the Wiluna district. The party aimed to reach Fitzroy Crossing, west of Halls Creek in the Kimberleys, and report on the country along the way.

They reached the native well, later to be called Separation, early in October and the men prepared for the next push north. In order to be able to report on more country, Wells divided his party. His cousin Charles Wells, and George Jones, a young Adelaide geologist, would leave Separation and travel west north-west before turning north. Maintaining this direction they planned to intersect the tracks of the main party which would travel north north-west for Joanna Spring.

Joanna Spring, estimated to be no more than 190 miles from Separation Well, would be the rendezvous for the two groups of explorers. Joanna Spring was discovered by Warburton and Lewis in their expedition of 1873.

Alas, how the best laid plans can go astray.

The going proved to be harder than Wells, leading the main party, ever imagined. Soaring temperatures, relentless, energy-consuming sandridges and lack of water forced the party to fall behind the planned timetable. They travelled only at night. Efforts to contact the other party by lighting bush fires failed. They struggled on to Warburton's position of Joanna Spring. They could not find it. Their situation was perilous. Wells consulted his men and they decided to push on, straightaway, for the Fitzroy River.

After a forced march, Wells and his weary team, reached the waters of the Fitzroy.

However, there was little cause for celebration. Although his party was now safely out of the desert and could recuperate on the banks of the life-giving river, the thoughts of Wells and his men were concentrated on the likely whereabouts of Charles Wells and George Jones.

When Lawrence Wells had farewelled them back at Separation, the two men had only three camels and enough supplies for one month. Wells knew they were in no position to match his own party's performance and reach the Fitzroy River.

He knew they could not be in front of him. Where were they? Had they headed west to find relief on the Oakover - like Warburton? Had they managed to find Joanna Spring? If so, where was it? How long could they wait there?

Lawrence Wells and his camel man Bejah retraced their steps back into the desert. After a three day journey, south from the Fitzroy, they left a cache of water and provisions on the remote chance that Wells and Jones were still following on the main party's tracks.

Then began the real drama as Wells, heroically, searched for the missing men on four separate expeditions.

On the first, using horses, Wells and a police trooper made only a few uncertain miles into the desert before being forced to return.

Nat Buchanan, newly arrived in the Kimberleys with a team of camels, travelled with Wells on the next search. An aborigine guided the party 100 miles into the desert from the Fitzroy River. However, as on the first expedition, the men were totally occupied finding enough water to keep themselves alive. They found no trace of the missing men before concern for their own survival forced them to flee north.

It was now early January - three months since the departure from Separation.

At Fitzroy Crossing, Wells spent two agonising months waiting for news of the missing men to reach him. Working his way east from the Oakover River, West Australian surveyor, Rudall, penetrated the desert as far as Separation. He found no trace of Wells and Jones.

Lawrence Wells set out again. There were rumours among the aborigines of dead and dying white men out in the desert. As Wells travelled south, he and his men questioned local aborigines and he eventually determined that a well the natives called Biggarong was Warburton's Joanna Spring.

Wells' astro-fix placed Joanna Spring 15 miles east of the position stated by Warburton. Charles Wells and George Jones, relying on Warburton's information, must be further west so the searchers headed in that direction.

They came on a group of aborigines who spoke of white men "killed by the sun." Then, as now, the inability of different races to communicate with each other caused confusion, misunderstanding and eventually, distrust. The searchers and the aborigines acted out a series of charades and exchanged a variety of words and noises without either party transmitting a definite message.

In the evening the aborigines indicated a willingness to guide Wells and his men further west. But in the morning, they were gone. Continuing

west, unguided, the searchers came to another group of aborigines. These appeared war-like. Wells pacified them. He saw, in their possession, items positively identified as belonging to the missing men. They were getting close.

However, once again, after promising to act as guides, the aborigines disappeared overnight. Wells believed the group were responsible for the deaths of his cousin and George Jones. He returned to Derby and organised another, the final, expedition - this time, with police.

The police captured aborigines who led the white men to the bodies of Charles Wells and George Jones. The tragedy soon unfolded.

After farewelling their leader at Separation Well on 11 October 1896, Wells and Jones had encountered such difficulties in the first week of travel they returned to Separation. After a few days of rest, they set off again, following the tracks of the main party - hopefully, to catch up with them at Joanna Spring.

The tracks proved hard to follow. They lost them. Their camels died. They trudged on and, in mid-November, reached a point only 14 miles south-west of the true position of Joanna Spring. Here, still on course for Warburton's position of the spring, too weak to carry on or retreat, they perished.

George Jones had written a letter to his parents. The search party found it. The letter indicated that he died bravely - with a detached preparedness for death. In the short note he expressed a faith in God, a desire to put his affairs in order and a regard for his family and friends - especially for Charles Wells, his friend at the bitter end. There was no hint of recrimination or any sign that Jones considered fate had treated him harshly or unfairly.

I recommend a study of Jones facing death to the many desert travellers (alas, including myself) who have behaved badly when forced to suffer a minor inconvenience. An inconvenience which it is usually man's nature to believe has been created for the sole purpose of causing him discomfort. Youthful George Jones knew that by venturing into the desert he was taking a risk. He not only acknowledged the risk. He stoically accepted the consequences. In his case, fatal.

In my own unreasonable way, I so admire Jones and his manner of dying that I have become suspicious of the accounts of survivors who describe their own fortitude in the face of danger in the desert.

We made 13 miles east of Well 27 before camping. I reckoned another six would bring us to the vicinity of Separation Well.

After an early start in the morning, we soon covered the six miles. We stopped to search on foot for the well. I spread the map on the ground and we each identified a square of country to cover. By searching independently, the

three of us could cover an extensive area in a comparatively short time. However, this time we did not have much to go on. Separation was a native well. Unlike the Canning wells there would be no above surface timbers. Our description consisted of no more than "in cajaput surrounded by an area of good feed."

Chud and I walked our sections and returned to the vehicles by eleven. Noel was still out. I decided on the next area to be covered. I set out again while Chud remained at the Land-Rovers to wait for Noel and boil the billy.

I have to be very careful walking in the bush. Most aborigines, many explorers and drovers, even some surveyors and tourists, are reported to have, or claim to have, a homing instinct. They can trust this inbuilt mechanism to guide them back to their starting point regardless of distance, topography, climatic conditions or availability of daylight. Apparently Canning and Nat Buchanan were both so gifted. Unfortunately, I am blessed with no such faculty.

My method of keeping track of myself in the desert is similar to that I adopted when, as a young teenager, I struck out from Wynyard Station to discover the city of Sydney.

In the desert I walk in a series of blocks. I confine my directions of travel to the four cardinal ones. I count by paces and I keep a strict check on the number of right-angle turns I make. My path consists of a series of squares or rectangles, one beside the other. As a further check I try to mentally take note of any unusual feature - a fallen tree, a rock outcrop - that may help guide me if my squares fail and I have to resort to following up my own footprints.

I came to an area of cajaput. Near its extremity I found a depression the size of a dining room table. I stood and looked at it. Maybe I should try digging here. While I thought about it, a couple of finches flew over the ridge behind me. Several more followed. I walked over the ridge myself. I saw the kind of vegetation I had come to recognise as Canning's "good feed." I came to a tiny claypan and near it a large wattle bush. Beside the bush I found a depression, only coffee table size and barely a foot deep, but containing a muddy ooze. I was confident. I walked further afield and found two sets of aboriginal grinding stones and several old campfires. I hurried back to the Land-Rovers.

Noel had returned. Chud had the tuckerbox out, the tea made and the transceiver set up. As we ate, I - none too modestly - told Chud and Noel of my find. To add to the excitement, Mac called us up after the Hedland "sked." He assured us that Bidge would be going out to Well 33.

Did we need any supplies? Chud had a list ready.

We packed up quickly and I led the way back to my muddy hole. We started digging. At a depth of three feet water began seeping in from the sides. We dug further and a roughly square shape became apparent. We dug deeper, getting muddier and more excited. We agreed. It was a hole in stone,

now six feet deep, only half a mile from the map position, what else could it be? It had to be Separation.

We made camp on the claypan although it was only early afternoon. The well gradually filled with water. A flock of galahs came to drink. They voiced their appreciation of our work with noisy squawking.

As claypans occur at low points in the country, the air around them at night is the coldest. I gathered a good supply of fire-wood and lit a big fire. With water on site, I washed: a thorough three bucket ablution. I put on my clean flannel pyjamas and then, my overalls. In the first two hours of darkness we carried out an astro-fix to verify the position of the well. Despite the extra clothing, I still felt a need to rush over to the fire and warm my body, especially its extremities, between each star observation.

With Separation found and its position fixed we squatted around the fire to relive the success of it all.

I tried to imagine old Larry (Wells) talking to his ill-fated cousin and young George Jones on the night before the separation - at this very spot. How could they have felt anything but insecure? (I instinctively looked over my shoulder to check on the presence of our squat, dependable Land-Rovers). Yet Wells wrote that the last evening at Separation had been a lively one. The men's spirits infected with the impending challenge. Chud must have been thinking along similar lines.

"If only they'd stayed together . . ." he mused.

I pointed out that the Burke and Wills expedition, Kennedy on Cape York, even Giles and Gibson, had suffered loss of life after their parties split up.

"Right," said Noel. "We stick together. What d'you reckon?"

"Sure, but what about Warburton?" said Chud. "He sent Lewis on ahead all the time. They split up and they still made it."

"No, that was a bit different," I told him. "When Lewis went ahead, Warburton and his son stayed put and just waited for him to come back. They weren't travelling at the same time or arranging meeting places."

"Doing his astro while he waited, I suppose. If he had done a bit more and fixed Joanna Spring more accurately, all this trouble may never have happened," said Chud.

"Well, I don't think he was too crash hot on astro but you can't really blame him for what happened. Remember back in those days the method of getting longitude was pretty rough. Anyhow, old Warburton knew there was something wrong with his astro. He lost his calculation book, and remember, when he did finally reach the Oakover, it was much further west than he had anticipated. He admitted all this. It's in his journal. Wells would have read it so he knew Warburton's fixes might not have been too good, especially the longitudes."

"I guess so," said Chud. "Poor old Wells and Jones never had a chance."

They were looking for a spring without knowing, within ten or twenty miles, where it really was. The abo's couldn't help them. They'd never heard of Joanna Spring. That was Warburton's name for it. I can see now why Canning tried to stick with the abo names for his wells. I'll bet he was thinking about what happened to Wells and Jones."

The fire was dying down. I threw the dregs of my coffee into it.

"I suppose it was a combination of several things going wrong but mainly just not realising how tough it would be to cross this desert. That's the main reason they never made it."

"Yes, what it amounts to is that you have to be extra careful, especially back in those days. There was no margin for error," said Noel.

"That's right. This Thomas Hardy that I'm reading talks about the country being 'emphatic in its admonitions.' "

Noel frowned at me. "What a puffed up Pommy way of saying it."

Years later, I heard it precisely expressed in Australian style, by Slim Dusty. My favourite of all Slim's lyricists, Stan Coster, called it "the land of no second chance."



Chud standing in Well 25

CHAPTER 14

Separation to Gunowoggi

As we left Separation the next morning I tried to compare our departure to that of Wells and his men on 11 October 1896. We had sturdy Land-Rovers, plenty of provisions, a link with the Flying Doctor base in Port Hedland and a map showing every substantial ridge and rock outcrop (not to mention Canning's wells). How could we compare ourselves with those old-timers on camels, with limited supplies, no contact with the outside world and no knowledge of what lay ahead - apart from a pin point in the desert, doubtfully located by a suffering explorer twenty years before? There was no comparison.

Canning's Well 28 was our next target. It lay north-west of Separation. Our direction of travel and the direction of the sandridges almost co-incided. Consequently, we had to cross very few ridges. However, with the prevailing winds at our backs, the vehicles' radiators did not benefit from its cooling effect.

Spinifex is the enemy of conventional Land-Rover engine cooling systems. When travelling forward the seeds lodge in the radiator core and restrict the airflow through it. The water returns to the engine warm, then hot and eventually boiling.

There are various stages to a boiling vehicle. The first stage can be watched on the temperature gauge: the needle enters the red section of the scale, moves across it and comes to rest against the stoppper designed to prevent it going off the scale altogether. Then the second stage begins. It consists of a high pitched whine emanating from under the bonnet. The nature of this whine varies as the strain on the cooling system increases. An experienced driver learns to recognise the tone of the whine immediately preceding the dramatic third stage of boiling - the bursting of a radiator hose.

We were now about half way along the stock route. In that distance Chud's vehicle had shaken loose many bushels of spinifex seed. Many had lodged in the vehicle's radiator. With no breeze reaching the radiator our stops for cooling became more frequent. Noel's Land-Rover, travelling in the swath cut by Chud's, had collected very little seed so his radiator still worked effectively.

At the first cooling stop I checked our position on the map and walked to the top of the ridges on either side.

"What d'you see," asked Noel.

"Sandridges."

"Oh. Nothing else?"

"No."

After the third and subsequent stops I took out my copy of *The Return of the Native* and read a few pages. Thomas Hardy soon relieved any feeling

of boredom that may have tempted me to display impatience. Dusty and dishevelled in the middle of the Great Sandy Desert, reading about the machinations of a group of village folk in nineteenth century England - only in retrospect does it occur to me that this picture of myself could be interpreted as incongruous.

It was good reading. I must have been poor company for Chud and Noel. While travelling between stops I lapsed into a morbid silence, ruminating on the fates of Diggory Venn, Clym Yeobright, Thomasin and her infernal mother, Wildeve, and Eustacia Vye. Eustacia. Through those pages of print Eustacia exuded more sex-appeal than many of the uncensored, licentious publications of today.

"That book's got you in. Is it the one about the desert?" asked Noel.

"No, it's not about the desert. It's the heathland or moors of England."

"What's it about then?"

"Oh, just a mob of people giving each other a hard time."

"Why? Can't they handle the tough country?"

"No it's not the country that causes the trouble. The people are managing to make themselves and each other miserable without getting any help from any country."

During the next drive I remembered how Patrick White's *Voss* had come to the same conclusion. He reckoned man was more harmful to man than the desert or any environment. Voss's thoughts were "how much less destructive of the personality are thirst, fever, physical exhaustion ... much less destructive than people."

The sight of a bucket in our path recalled me to the present. We had reached the vicinity of Well 28. Noel spotted the windlass. Like Well 25, this one was almost full of sand. I volunteered to emulate Chud's performance and stand in the well for photographs. On closer inspection I saw that the sand in the well was damp. Many colourful, slow-flying wasps, attracted by the moisture, hovered ominously. I decided Chud's act would not seem so funny a second time.

I found an aboriginal spear. It was about six feet long, half an inch in diameter and sharpened viciously at one end. In the years the spear had lain beside the well it had bowed and slightly split.

After lunch we pressed on for Well 29. We successfully crossed a couple of ridges then Chud's vehicle came on the boil again. The frequency and duration of cooling stops increased. Eventually Chud claimed we were resting more than travelling. He used the air-pump, that runs off a cylinder of the idling engine, to blow spinifex seeds out of the radiator. The partial success of this operation and the cooler, late afternoon air enabled us to reach the map position of Well 29. As Chud and Noel made camp in a clump of mulga, I made a quick search for the well.

Walking confidently, about a mile from the camp, I saw a snake. A big brown one. I stopped. The snake stopped. At a distance of twenty feet, we stared at each other. Slowly and deliberately, the snake continued on its way. I returned to camp.

Snakes frighten me.

I try to support most of the new ideas of conservation aimed to protect Australian wildlife and the environment. But I am still unable to regard a snake as anything but an enemy. I am not alone in this opinion. One of my favourite Australians, Keith Garvey, assures me that because a snake performed the first con-trick on mankind (in the Garden of Eden), they must never be forgiven.

If I think I can get away with killing a snake, I do. For a weapon I favour the long-handled shovel and my method is to break the snake's back and then behead it. I have seen many snakes and killed a few, yet I still shake when I see one. I don't like talking about them and frequently dream, or more correctly, have nightmares about them.

I know there are some people with no fear of snakes, but I reckon they are born, not made, to this condition. I am suspicious of snake conservationists. I have seen too many of them quickly lose their noble live-and-let-live attitude in the presence of a threatening snake. I leave it to future generations to come to terms with these slithering, untrustworthy reptiles.

I did not tell Chud and Noel of my encounter with the brown.

"Couldn't find the well. We'll have a proper search to-morrow," I told them.

After tea Chud rigged up his trouble light, donned his very off-white overalls and began poking a piece of copper wire through each cavity in the radiator to clear away the spinifex seed. He lay beneath the vehicle and each time he withdrew the wire a fine spray of seed descended upon him. Systematically, as always, Chud started at the top of the radiator and, as if he were reading a book he worked his way down line after line. It was a laborious task. With admirable patience and thoroughness, Chud stuck at it until he had wriggled that wire through the length and breadth of the radiator.

But any job, no matter how boring or unpleasant, associated with his beloved Land-Rover was a pleasure for Chud. He loved his vehicle. He often bestowed affectionate pats to the mud-guards or bonnet with words like "ah, you're not a bad old bus, are you?" or "yes old girl we'll make it through okay."

To say that Chud fondled his vehicle is no exaggeration.

He took many photographs of her - yes, he used feminine pronouns when speaking of his Land-Rover. He justified the expense of these pictures by claiming that they were for "the boys in the Land-Rover Club back in Canberra."

Like so many success stories, the success of the Land-Rover was largely

a matter of chance. In the immediate post-war years there was little demand for saloon cars. The Rover company began making Land-Rovers to keep the organisation viable until the saloon car market improved. The temporary product saved the company and became its corner-stone.

Chud often spoke of visiting the Rover factory at Solihull in England as, I imagine, a Moslem speaks of going to Mecca.

In the morning I organised the search for Well 29.

"Right. It's between these two ridges and to the west of our camp. The ridges are about 300 yards apart. I'll take the centre 100, you each take the 100 yards either side and we'll walk west. We can't miss it."

We missed it. After two miles, I called a halt.

"Okay, we're too far west now. You two change sides and we'll head back."

On the way back Noel found the well between the lines Chud and myself had walked on the way out. There was no troughing or whip pole but the well itself was in good condition and contained water. After my valuable find (the spear) at the last well, I had a good look around this one. I found the glass top of an ENO fruit salts jar.

We left the camp about ten and back among the sandridges, Chud's vehicle, with the clear radiator, performed well. The temperature gauge needle stayed steady in the middle of the red. However, Chud now detected the painful groaning noise that indicates a broken spring. He stopped to look. The main leaf, driver's side front, was broken.

"Your extra weight on that side," I suggested.

"Too much of your bloody custard," he answered.

We knew how to change springs. There was no panic. Chud parked under a tree and we ate lunch first. We set up the transceiver. Chud and Noel sent telegrams to tell their families we had safely passed the half way mark on the Canning Stock Route. I didn't send one. My mother associates telegrams with either winning the lottery or a death in the family. After the "sked", Mac answered and assured us that Bidge would be at Well 33 on 1 August - three days away.

When we came to change the spring, Chud and I discovered that three men can do the job more quickly than two - especially when Noel is the third man. We removed the spring assembly, replaced the broken leaf and re-fixed the spring in less than an hour. Noel's mechanical jack came in handy.

Hydraulic jacks may be superior lifting vertically, but the mechanical jack is more versatile. We used Noel's in a horizontal position to push the spring into the correct alignment before inserting the U-bolts.

When the job was finished, Noel stared down at the much-abused jack. He nudged it with the toe of his boot.

"This little bastard has his uses," was his begrudging compliment.

In the late afternoon we broke out of the sandridges. The driving was easier over the flat scrubby country, but the navigation was harder. The main features of the landscape consisted of small, easily-avoided sandridges and large bloodwood trees. Neither of these features are shown on the 1:250 000 map series.

Inevitably, we camped beside a small sandridge, near several tall bloodwoods. There were also a few acres of thistles around our site. Thistles, introduced into the desert by travelling stock, are an indication of the proximity of the stock route.

In spite of this I had to confess, "I'm not sure where we are. We should be near Well 30, but in this bloody scrub I've nothing to go on."

"Looks like another job for astro-man," said Chud.

After tea we began observing confidently. Too confidently. Previously, we had observed several pairs of stars in order to have a check on our work. But this evening I was tired. The morning's walk and the afternoon's work had worn me out.

"Look mate, we only need this fix to plot our position. One pair'll do, don't you reckon?"

"Sure. One'll be plenty," Chud agreed. He was tired too.

I blundered my way through the calculations. Chud carried out a partial check. We concluded that one mile of travel, due east, would bring us to Well 30, Dunda Jinnda.

I woke early in the morning. Under a cloudy sky, we drove confidently. The one mile east took us clear of the bloodwood trees onto a spinifex plain: a most unlikely well site. We began walking, no longer confident. I saw galahs flying west, towards some trees but away from where our astro fixed the well. I edged towards the trees, torn between the rule that birds fly to water in the morning and my confidence in our ability at astro. I saw a row of galahs sitting on a horizontal perch close to the ground. I walked directly towards them. The perch consisted of rails, rails around a well, well 30, Dunda Jinnda.

I hailed Chud and Noel. They drove the vehicles over. The well was a good one. Good water close to the surface.

I liked Dunda Jinnda. The tall bloodwoods gave the area a park-like appearance. The well's bucket hung from a high branch.

"There are some energetic vandals around," said Noel.

Chud's search for artefacts led him over a small ridge and out of sight of the well. Then I heard him calling.

"Hey. You blokes. Come over here."

Noel and I ambled over. He was staring down at our camp site of the previous night. I looked back at the well. A couple of hundred yards away,

north.

"Er ... how can that be? Something must've gone wrong last night. Oh dear. Astro-man has blundered." I inspected the ashes of last night's fire, reluctant to believe it was ours. I saw the wheel tracks, our footprints, marks in the sand left by our tripod - it was all incriminating evidence. I shook my head in disbelief.

Noel broke the silence. "Just as well there are plenty of galahs around here or we could've missed this well," he said.

"Yes, you're right," I replied and, to change the subject, "I'm going to have a wash."

We all bucket bathed. In a small party, living close together in the desert, it is important that everyone washes at the same time. If one person washes and the others don't, the clean person will notice that the others are dirty and the dirty ones will feel uncomfortable beside the clean. However, if everyone is in the same state of dirtiness (or cleanliness) no distinctions are noticeable and the question of who is dirty and who is clean never arises.

We filled our water tanks with the sweet Dunda Jinnda water and moved off to find Mujingerra.

Mujingerra is described in *The Beckoning West* as an under-ground rockhole. Canning descended, through a dead tree, into a limestone cave. A tunnel led to a large pool of water.

Our maps placed this subterranean water two and a half miles south-east of Dunda Jinnda.

The confused sandridges and scrubby country made driving this bearing and distance no easy matter. I judged it to the best of my ability and organised a search. The frequency of limestone outcrops indicated that we were in the right area.

After my success with galahs in the morning I tried to utilize the flight patterns of zebra finches in the same way. My attempts to follow these birds led me to walk a mass of ill-shaped, over-lapping squares and, eventually, to the belief that the birds were following me.

Noel and Chud and myself trooped around that country for three hours - without success.

"I'll bet a dead tree's fallen over the entrance."

"Maybe the entrance has filled up with sand."

"Could the map position be wrong?"

"P'raps our two and a half miles south-east is upta."

We were tired enough of searching to allow Mujingerra to become our first failure.

Continuing east along the stock route we traversed the worst kind of desert country: continuous but insignificant sandridges, running in all directions and enormous clumps of spinifex separated by deep, saucer-shaped

hollows. The steering wheel tugged at Chud's arms while the cabin of the vehicle swayed - backward and forward, side to side - like a ship pitching in a rough sea.

With some relief, I sighted a large clump of white gums.

"Head for them," I told Chud. "Canning reckons 31 is in a clump like that." However, before we could reach it, Chud had to stop to transfer petrol from a drum to a fuel tank. While he and Noel did this job, I walked ahead to look for the well.

My feet appreciated the clear, level ground beneath the trees. I found the well in a small watercourse. The ground around it had fallen in, making a close inspection difficult. I could see water in the bucket hanging from the windlass.

I walked back and met Chud and Noel on the edge of the trees. They saw a clear piece of ground and decided to camp on it. The well could wait until tomorrow, so pleased were they to be out of spinifex.

Along the Canning Stock Route the spinifex is always with you. It thrives on the ridges and in the valleys between, and on the gravelly rises small clumps manage to survive.

Although there are several distinct varieties and the correct name is trioda, it is universally referred to (and cursed) as spinifex.

Humans tend to regard spinifex in the same way they do sandridges - specifically designed to hinder their progress. It grows in distinct clumps of various sizes. The clumps accumulate sand and are usually closer to each other than the width of a vehicle and are, therefore, unavoidable.

In the Land-Rover the smaller clumps cause constant small bumps while the larger ones ensure a more dramatically uneven progress. A vehicle can easily bottom on the sand contained in a large clump of spinifex.

On foot, I followed a continually winding path and suffered only the inconvenience of those spikes of spinifex radiating beyond the perimeter of the clump. The alternative of maintaining a direct course and stepping in the clumps is fraught with danger. More and thicker spikes, uneven surface and the risk of disturbing a reptile.

Spinifex is tough and resilient. It grows where no other grasses can. In combination with the sandridges it has kept the Great Sandy Desert comparatively free of the ravages of man. It enhances the desert's reputation of being superior to man. For this reason it commands respect. I would like to see it included in the Australian coat of arms.

In the late afternoon the sun's slanting rays shine through the tall spinifex fronds and transform the landscape to silver. The shadows of the ridges creep across the valleys between and the silver sombre turn to a soft brown. The heat dies. Coolness. Evening. Rest. Peace.

I decided not to comment on the beauty of desert spinifex while Chud continued to complain of a stiff neck - caused by the hours he spent under his vehicle cleaning his radiator. It became another evening chore for Chud

and Noel to remove spinifex seeds from their vehicles' radiators.

In our camp among the Well 31 gum trees, Chud also had a puncture to repair. As he and Noel worked to break the bead on the tyre, I prepared to make a damper. Chud prided himself on his ability in this art so he had monopolised the chore. But tonight he was too busy. I must try.

"Okay mate," I said to him, "what's the recipe for dampers? And don't try and tell me Jesus Christ has anything to do with it."

Chud looked over at me. "Gonna have a go at one are you? Best of luck. You've seen me make a few. Just do as I do." He turned back to the tyre.

I realised later that he was not being hard on me. Damper making is a matter of experience (or luck) and patience.

The experience (or luck) to have the correct proportions of self-raising flour and water in the damper mixture to start with.

The experience (or luck) to stop kneading the mixture at the right moment, before placing it in the camp oven.

The experience (or luck) to place the correct number of coals at the optimum temperature inside a hole in the ground before inserting the camp oven. The coals of different types of wood produce different degrees of heat.

The experience (or luck) to know the precise moment to remove the camp oven from the hole in the ground.

And finally, the patience to wait for the camp oven to cool before attempting to remove the damper from it.

On my first attempt to make a damper my lack of confidence became increasingly apparent as comments from the puncture-repairers interrupted my concentration.

"What's he doing now?"

"This damper will be so hard we'll be able to use it as a jacking block."

"Careful when you take the lid off the camp oven, this damper might float off in the breeze."

"We might be able to use it as a discus or nail it to a tree like a Dirk Hartog pewter dish. That's if we can drive a nail through it."

But the hungry have little pride. When the puncture was repaired Chud and Noel marched across to me. "Righto, let's get stuck into this damper." They each cut a large slice. I anxiously awaited the verdict. Between gulps of hot coffee, with his mouth full to overflowing, almost reluctantly, Chud admitted, "It's okay."

The next day I showed Chud and Noel Well 31. Both this well and the previous one we had found using only Canning's description. We moved on towards Well 32. Mallowa.

The Canning Stock Route now lay between dense sandridges on the west and gravelly rises on the east. Unfortunately the wells are closer to the sandridges so we could not allow ourselves the luxury of steering a course over the gravelly rises. However, when we came to a track, I could resist the

temptation no longer.

"Take it," I said to Chud.

Ah, the comfort of a track. After the many miles of bouncing across spinifex, the track, even though it was a rough one, felt as smooth as bitumen. Chud helped me justify my decision.

"It'll give the springs a rest," he said.

Sadly, the track led us too far east. Another track joined ours from the west, so we took it. It degenerated into a seismic track and led to a network of many others.

Seismic tracks are laid down by geological exploration parties, usually in a simple geometric pattern. To a motorist, trying to find his way through, the pattern can appear anything but simple. We haphazardly penetrated the seismic area to a point I considered somewhere near Well 32.

We set off on our search routine. Chud and I met up after covering our first sectors. We saw smoke rising from Noel's. We drove the Land-Rovers across. Noel had found the well, but we found him desperately trying to prevent his signal fire from consuming it.

I made the mistake of laughing. Noel glared at me. His face shone with a frightening combination of soot and sweat.

"Alright you city clod-hoppers, get your arses over here and give me a hand to put this out."

We obeyed, quickly.

Well 32 was in good condition. A piece of tin giving the well number and the mileages to the two adjoining wells, hung from the whip pole. These pieces of tin were placed at every well but many have become the property of souvenir hunters. A bullet hole in one of the buckets reminded me that we were now close to the Kidson road. The road which runs out from the Pilbara region to the stock route.

At lunch the radio message from Mac at Warrawagine assured us that Bidge was already on this road and would meet us tomorrow at Well 33. Mac referred to Bidge as the Yarrie Express.

We drove along a well-used track that crossed the Kidson road obliquely and led on to Well 33, Gunowaggi.

Gunowaggi was full to overflowing. Water, up to knee depth, covered an area of over 50 square feet with the well at its centre. A large white crane remained at the water's edge, unconcerned by our presence.

We drove back to the Kidson road and camped beside it. With the Yarrie people coming out tomorrow, we would sleep here for two consecutive nights.

Before tea I carefully distributed the second one-third of my bottle of rum. I proposed a toast.

"Two-thirds of the Canning down. One-third to go."

"Yes, and we thought that last section would be the hardest. We're on tracks for most of the way now," said Chud.

Noel did not like to see us getting too cocky. He said, "That may be so, but how often does it happen that the bit you expect most trouble from turns out easy while the bit you thought would be a snack causes all the trouble. You must have had it happen to you on survey jobs. I know it's happened often enough to me. Just remember, we're still in the middle of one of the biggest deserts in Australia. What's it you fellas say? 'Halls Creek's a long way up from here.' Well, it still is."

"Yes, you're right Noel. It's still 500 miles to go," I said.

"Well I'll relax more when we get to Well 35 and check that our fuel dump there is okay," said Chud.

"Don't worry, she'll be right. Enjoy your rum," I told him. "Ah, it's good stuff. I don't know why I ever drink anything else." And, after another sip, I added, "You can't beat the old O.P."

"You better watch it son. You might turn into a rum alkie when you get back to town," said Chud.

"Could be. There are worse things I could do with my life."

"When did you get started on this rum drinking?" Chud asked.

"Well, when I started travelling and spending a whole day at the pub, I tried to keep up with the experienced drinkers. When they fronted the bar the next morning for a heart-starter, I couldn't look at a beer, let alone drink one. But I found rum and ginger ale did me the world of good. Then out here last year, when beer took up too much space and we couldn't keep it cold anyway, I learnt to drink rum and water. Best thing I ever did." I took another sip. "Yes, that's it. I was wondering what to do after this trip. I'll become a rum alkie."

"Okay," said Noel, "but let's get some tea together first."

"Right. And I've got a special treat for you for dessert tonight."

"Oh yes?" said Chud. He looked at Noel, worried.

After the stew, now fortified with Henry's beef, I broke the seal on a fruit cake.

My mother is a good cook. (Isn't everyone's mother?) She excels at fruit cakes. At home these cakes contain only a small dose of rum, but when mother's eldest son ventures into the great outback she believes, correctly, that more rum is required. I had carried the well-laced cake from Canberra, sealed in a "soldier" tin.

My idea for the treat was simple. I placed three pieces of cake in an empty syrup tin and jammed the lid on tight. I placed the tin in a saucepan of boiling water. Chud watched me closely.

"What the bloody hell are you doing to that cake?" he asked.

"Not cake, my friend, steam pudding."

"Yuh reckon?" He looked at the tin in the saucepan. "I don't like the way that tin's rolling around in the hot water."

Neither did I. Using the tongs, I placed the tin upright and put a large

stone on the lid to keep it upright while the water boiled around it.

I made some custard then, using the tongs again, I lifted the stone off the tin and threw-it into the bush. I opened the tin. Water had entered and soaked the cake. I served out the soggy mess and covered it with custard.

"H'mm," said Chud. "Pretty bloody soggy. Next time I'll have the stone with my custard and you can throw away the cake."

Noel was kinder. "Don't worry about him, mate. Your custard could disguise anything." Only a little kinder.

With the Yarrrie Express due the next day, Chud and Noel wrote letters. I had plenty to write myself, but the rum had stimulated me. "I know," I said. "I'll see if I can get some bebop."

I set up the radio we used for our astro time signals and tried short wave. To escape the Chinese jangling so prevalent on those bands, I switched to broadcast and picked up a commercial station in Adelaide. Reception was poor but I could hear enough to encourage me to keep listening.

I was glad I did. The announcer informed me that tomorrow was the birthday of all horses. To mark the occasion he would play a bracket of Slim Dusty numbers.

Good old Slim. There are very few parts of Australia, outside the cities, where Slim Dusty's music is out of place. Certainly not in a roadside camp on the Canning Stock Route,

When I attended primary school, and my teachers endeavoured to train me to sing English folk songs, the local commercial radio station introduced me to Slim Dusty. My respect and admiration for Slim and his music dates from that time. The Australia Slim Dusty sings about is the Australia like to believe in.

When You're Short of a Quid, How Did I Go With Him, Mate?, Way Out There, When the Sun Goes Down Outback, Just Saddle Old Darkie, Gumtrees By the Roadway (and Willows By the Creek), Trumby (was a Ringer), When We Muster On the Golden Plains, Walkin' On My Way, Rusty - It's Goodbye, Suvla Bay, My Pal Alcohol, Middleton's Rousabout, Sweeney, Grasshopper Loose in Queensland - even The Pub With No Beer.

I know many well-educated people, including Australians, who can prove that this kind of Australia is a myth. Maybe it is. But belief in a myth is not necessarily a bad thing. It can sustain civilisations, let alone give a good deal of pleasure and comfort to a few million Australians.

Slim has critics, but they are mostly city-bred, city-confined cynics. And yet, even such cynics have been known to change their opinion about my hero after an enforced period in the bush or on the road.

In the country, Slim suffers very little criticism. Both Yarrrie and Glen-Ayle had a gramophone, their Slim Dusty records and their other records. Slim and his band have travelled many remote roads in outback

Australia and most country Australians spare no effort to reach the nearest town when they know Slim is due to perform.

I've seen his show several times. Slim, with the front brim of his hat turned down and the sleeves of his checked shirt rolled up, wears moleskin trousers and riding boots. He mixes his old favourites with a few new numbers.

He and his wife write many of the songs. Slim has put some of Henry Lawson's best poems to music and they are appreciated by men and women who never read or listen to poetry. He also has many friends who write songs for him. Friends who understand his kind of Australia - myth or no myth.

Here I was in the great outback, the heart of Australia, beside a campfire with mates. I had eaten and drunk grog with them. I was tired and happy, conscious that I was doing something distinctly Australian - even hovering on the perimeter of Australian history. I felt good. After a few Slim Dusty songs I felt better. Ecstatic. I leaned forward as Slim's voice rose and fell through the static. I tapped my foot in the sand. I folded my arms, tightly. Goose bumps rose on my back and neck as I listened.

"I drift back through the ages
while the big cars gently roll
to a stockyard and a waggonette
and a fire of gidgee coals"

"Yahoo. Good on you Slim," I shouted into the desert darkness.



Well 28

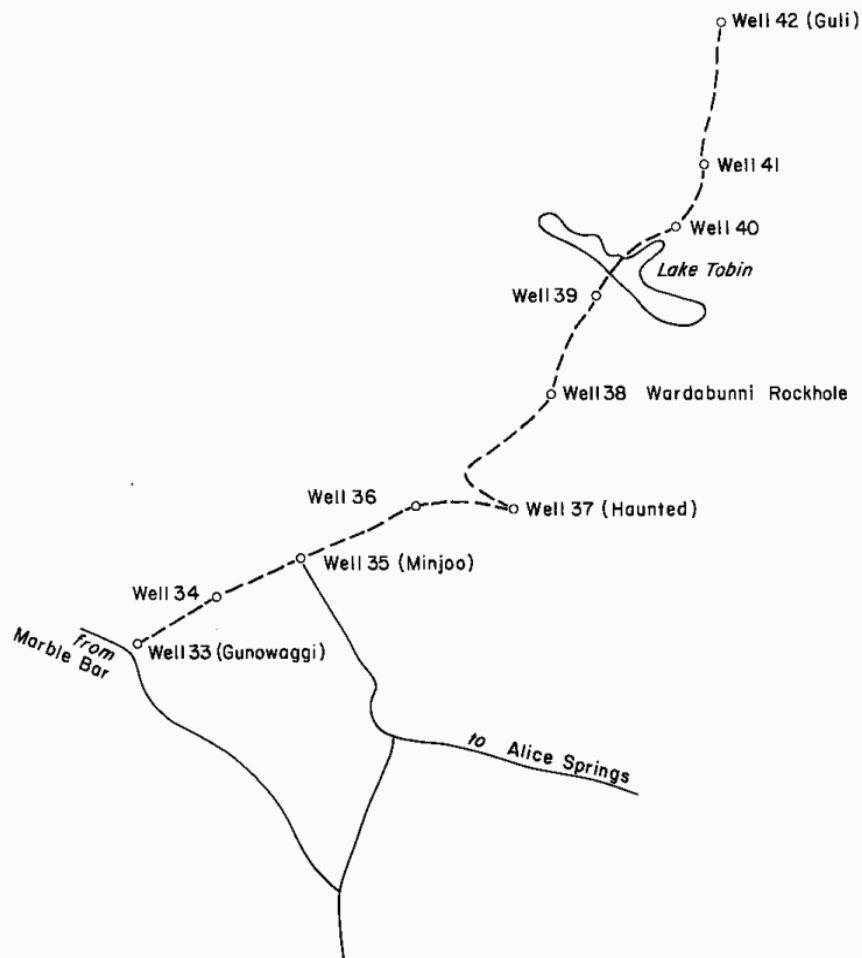


Well 30 - bucketing water

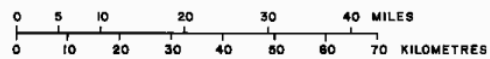


Well 31

CHAPTER 15



— GUNOWAGGI TO GULI —



CHAPTER 15

Gunowaggi to Guli

With no travelling planned for the day, I intended to sleep in. However, the intention failed to reach all my senses. As usual, I woke at first light. Chud and Noel slept on, so I finished *The Return of the Native*. I felt little sympathy for the characters who allowed their lives to become so miserable without even trying to find solace in the overwhelming peace of the wilderness within their reach.

After breakfast I prepared a road sign to warn traffic that "government wonders" were resting in this vicinity. I set it on the Kidson road for the benefit of the Yarrie Express.

I always referred to this road out from the Pilbara as the Kidson because it led to the Kidson airfield. However, the Wapet (West Australian Petroleum) company built the road when they searched for oil in the area during the early 60's. Edward Kidson worked for the Carnegie Institution of Washington. He travelled down the stock-route in 1914 taking a series of magnetic readings. His survey was part of a magnetic survey of Australia.

With directions to our camp clearly signposted, we drove up to Gunowaggi and washed - thoroughly. We changed into clean clothes. We were, after all, expecting visitors for lunch.

After imagining I could hear a vehicle on at least a dozen occasions, when the Yarrie Express did arrive I saw the Land-Rover before I heard it. I made a show of directing Bidge to a vacant parking spot.

Chud, Noel and myself rushed to meet our craggy old friend as he got out of the vehicle. We expected Mrs Welsh or Langtree to be with Bidge, so we were surprised to discover that Sue was Bidge's co-driver. Weary of tourists and the Red Centre, she had returned to Yarrie: her home in the ironstone hills.

After handshakes Bidge informed us: "Look boys, I'm sorry but we can't stay long. Our shearing starts soon and the Marble Bar races are on in a couple of days. We'll have to head back this afternoon."

"What, you can't even stay the night?"

"I'm afraid not. We really must get back as soon as we can."

My initial disappointment to learn they could not stay long, soon gave way to a thankfulness that Bidge, so busy, had spared the time - not to mention the expense - to make the thousand mile round trip out to see us.

"Well, there's no doubt about you old fella. Some blokes'll do anything to collect a couple of bob," I said.

"Hold on. It's four bob you owe me now. Remember this trip is for double or nothing on the two bob you already lost at Yarrie," Bidge corrected me. He went on, "Jean and the girls have been busy in the kitchen for the last

couple of days. We'll unload the parcels, have lunch, then you can show us Well 33 and we'll be on our way."

"You got my list, then?" asked Chud.

"Yes," said Frank, "but from the amount of stuff we have here I think Jean has packed a little extra."

She had. Our mouths watered as we unpacked the delicacies Mrs Welsh had prepared. Apart from essential items like sugar, which we were already out of, there were two cakes (with icing), several pasties, choice pieces of Yarrie mutton, eggs, peas and beans, and even a few oranges.

"Here. Take these," said Bidge handing me potatoes. "When the De Grey finally went down, we found them growing in one of the paper barks. Thought you might like them."

However, the piece de resistance was two bottles and six cans of Emu Bitter. Sue gave these items into Noel's charge. "Here Noel, you take these. I wouldn't trust either of those other two with the stuff," she said.

We sat down to lunch. Chud and I did most of the talking - telling stories against each other. We had different company. Someone to tell our incidents of travel to. Someone who had not experienced them.

I also had some serious questions for Bidge.

"Listen Bidge, I've had time to do some thinking since we left Yarrie. There's something I can't figure. You know how Canning travelled solo in to Wallal from the edge of the desert when he was on the rabbit-proof fence survey? That was in the early 1900s. Now Nat Buchanan drove cattle down from the Kimberleys into the East Murchison in 1892 and I've read where he stayed a couple of days at Coppin's station on the De Grey. Okay?"

Bidge smiled his indulgent smile. "Yes Russell, go on."

"Well I assume Wallal was the nearest Telegraph Office at that time so Canning had to go there. But Coppin's station must've been near where Yarrie is now and not far out of Canning's way. Wouldn't you think he'd have called in? Especially when he only had one camel and it was in pretty bad shape. It would've taken all the risk out of his trek. What was he up to? Making it hard for himself or what? He must've known Coppin had that station on the De Grey, don't you reckon?"

"Yes. He must've known it was there. But I don't know why he ignored it. You're right about being quite safe if he had gone via Coppin's. Maybe he was just anti-social. Maybe he was in a desperate hurry or, as you say, he wanted to do it the hard way."

Bidge warmed to his topic. "And it wasn't just Yarrie. Muccan and Warrawagine were both well established at that time. Canning ignored them too. Remember, according to Trotman in *The Beckoning West*, Trotman and the camel man waited at the junction of the Oakover and the De Grey for Canning. This junction would've been less than 30 miles from where Coppin

had his first Yarrie homestead. Warrawagine was even closer. Even if these stations were too far out of Canning's way, you'd reckon he'd have let his men wait at one of them, wouldn't you?"

"Sure do. Gee, these drovers and blokes establishing the first stations were out there earlier than I realised."

"Funny you should say that Russell, because this Chris Coppin was on the De Grey even when your hero, Lewis, brought Warburton out of the desert," said Bidge.

"You mean to tell me that Lewis went almost down to the coast looking for help when there was a station less than 30 miles from the De Grey-Oakover junction?"

I glanced at Chud. His look of disbelief matched my own. How could Lewis have so erred?

Bidge was enjoying himself. "No, it wasn't that close then. It wasn't until 1884 that Coppin moved up to Yarrie, but when Lewis came down the De Grey - when was it, 1873? - Coppin was at Muccan - just downstream. His place was on the north side of the river but you'd reckon there'd have been some indication to a bushman that there was a settlement nearby. Maybe Lewis wanted to do it the hard way too." Bidge almost laughed.

"Not bloody likely. They were damn near dead," said Chud.

"Why didn't you tell me all this when I was at Yarrie," I demanded of Bidge.

"You didn't ask me."

"Well. It certainly makes you think. I mean, it looks like these stockmen did as much - or more - to open up new country as the explorers and surveyors. It's just that they never got around to writing reports on where they went and what they did. Too busy, I guess. I wonder how many of the explorers and surveyors - my heroes - followed cattle pads but never mentioned it in their reports?"

"Or how many crossed cattle pads and never saw them?" Chud added.

"Quite a few, I reckon. Quite a few," said Noel.

We plied Bidge and Sue with tea and damper but Bidge was anxious to be on his way. The drive out had not been easy. Long sections of the road across Lake Auld were under water. While the water was not deep and the road surface was still firm, the danger of running off the road and bogging was considerable. Bidge wanted to be back over the flooded section before dark.

Chud led the way up to Well 33. We took photographs of each other beside it. We gave Bidge our letters to post and shook his hand. He sat behind the wheel of his Land-Rover with its engine running, as Chud continued to give him details of ridges crossed and petrol consumed. At a pause in Chud's speech, Bidge lifted Chud's hand from the door of the vehicle and smiled blandly.

"Yes. Right. That's good, Chud. And we'll see you later." The Land-Rover moved forward and away.

The mood back in our camp was like that on Christmas morning after all the presents are open. Flat. I washed some clothes, aired my blankets and re-packed the tucker-box while Chud and Noel serviced their vehicles.

About four o'clock I announced, "Hey, I've got these bottles of beer quite cold." I had wrapped the two bottles in a wet towel and hung them in a tree. Chud and Noel soon decided the Land-Rovers were ready.

A couple of mugs of Emu Bitter before tea. A main course of fresh vegetables and crisp pasties. Cake (with icing) for dessert. I lay back against my swag sipping coffee, reading one of the newspapers Frank had delivered. Chud observed:

"Ghost, life can be tough out here on the Canning."

I did not answer him. I didn't even look up. The papers were over a week old, from Perth: a city I know very little of, but I read all three avidly. Towns and cities. Trouble and strife. The complications of communities. The prose of slick journalists. The press releases of multi-national companies. Even the painful English of self-opinionated advertising men. I read it all.

I ignored the wonder of the heavens, the might of nature, the beauty of the desert night, the comradeship of Chud and Noel. My newly discovered affinity for the desert and living close to the earth was neglected, forgotten, as I read city newspapers late into the night.

"Righto you guys. How do you want your eggs? Poached, fried or boiled? Thanks to old Bidge we've got something more than the good old double-you Bix and damper for breakfast this morning." After the meal we worked for more than an hour to break camp and Chud's pertinent comment was: "The longer you stay in a camp the longer it takes to get away from it."

A track survived to a point about seven miles beyond Well 33. Then a trail of thistles led us to Well 34, Nibil. Nibil well contained water, however the entire area was submerged in a sea of thistles.

Pushing north, we came to a track which continued to Well 35, Minjoo. This well had been my base camp's water supply the previous year. I recognised the carpet snake lying between the well timbers, just above water level.

"I think he put on weight during the year I told Chud and Noel.

"I'm not surprised," said Noel. "There must be plenty of snake fodder coming down here to drink."

The snake blinked his unfeeling eye.

Minjoo marks the intersection point of the Canning Stock Route with the old National Mapping track from the Pilbara. (The Kidson or Wapet road has now rendered it superfluous.) Minjoo was one of the first wells to be re-discovered after the droving days and the Native Welfare Department established a fuel depot near it. We located the 44-gallon drums we had organised to be delivered here. With no pumps and a narrow diameter siphon

hose, the re-fueling process was a long one.

From Minjoo the National Mapping survey traverse generally follows the stock route north and north-east. Our survey for the Bureau of Mineral Resources had followed this traverse. We decided to follow the same route and detour to the wells when necessary.

Trig stations and bench marks became a regular sight. A signpost read "Billiluna 350" (miles). Kidson Bluff, which would not raise a comment in the Hamersleys or the Pilbara, reared high, brown and impressive. On the low gravelly hills grevillea and wattle were green from the recent rain. In the late afternoon, the green changed to a light, and then dark, purple. Another signpost directed us to Well 36, Wanda - another well in good condition. It was barely five o'clock but, with our six cans of Emu cooling in a wet bag, we camped early.

I had noticed blowflies in the back of Chud's Land-Rover at Gunowaggi. When I unrolled the bag containing the Glen-Ayle salted meat to give it an airing now, I saw another - and another. Oh dear. Several colonies of maggots, at various stages of development, nestled in the beef. I suggested throwing it out.

"No way," said Chud. "I'll clean it up later."

"What do you mean 'clean it up?' "

"I'll flick the maggots off, boil it in water, and rub some more salt in.

"It'll be okay."

"Alright. But if you don't mind I'll leave you to it," I said.

While tea cooked, we drank the six cans of beer - mouthful for mouthful, swallow for swallow. We extracted maximum pleasure from the limited supply. No six-pack was ever so praised. As I opened my second can, Noel asked:

"Anyhow what's the great rum drinker doing making such a fuss over a couple of cans of beer?"

"I'm prepared to make exceptions, Noel. I'd be likely to watch you and Chud drink three cans each, wouldn't I?" I held my can aloft. "Well, it ain't Tooheys with Gina Lollobrigida, but it'll do."

Noel looked puzzled. Knowing I would not give him a straight answer, he asked Chud. "What's he on about? When's he ever had a drink with Gina Lollobrigida?"

Chud smiled. "It's simple. There's a portrait of her in the saloon bar of the Civic Hotel where we drink back in Canberra. He's rapt in it."

"Don't worry, he likes it too, Noel. So would you. She's in this sort of tight-fitting evening dress which shows off her body real well. She's got a sexy look on her face. Her lipstick is wet. Her mouth is slightly open and ..."

Noel interrupted me. "Hold it, hold it. Steady down boy. You'll be a nice old mess by the time we reach Halls Creek at this rate. Just concentrate on your beer, will you?"

Our conversation turned to the provider of the beer.

"You know, old Bidge looked more at home in our stock route camp than we did. Really relaxed. As though he belonged in the desert. Not out of place, like I reckon we do," I said.

"That's not surprising. He's lived most of his life in the Pilbara, close by," said Chud.

"True. But isn't it a fact that older men look more relaxed in the desert? Why do you reckon that is?"

Chud thought about it for a minute. "I don't know. But I think you're right. Maybe because the desert's so old that older blokes are more in tune with it."

I turned to Noel. "Yes, how about it old-timer. You've been around a while. What d'you reckon?"

Noel didn't smile. He looked at my feet. "Well, for one thing we don't wear those useless bloody thongs." After another mouthful of beer, he went on. "Older guys move more slowly. More economically. They know what they're going to do before they move. Even around the camp fire, you fellas seem to be all over the place. Take it easy. Slow and steady wins out here. That's why the old blokes have such a good record. I read where that Lawrence Wells led a final expedition into the desert when he was over seventy. And didn't Canning have to come back out here when he was an old man? I guess the bosses couldn't find a young bloke capable of doing the job."

"Come on, we're not that bad. Sure, Canning did bring a party up to re-condition the wells when he was nearly 70 and I admit it pretty good for an old guy, but I'll bet he was as keen as hell to go back over his stock route. And I'll bet they never even asked any young bloke to do the job."

By the 1920s many of the stock-route wells needed repairing. Rotted timbers, rusted metal, damage caused by white ants and aborigines had made driving a mob of cattle down the Canning Stock Route a risky operation.

Some south Kimberley cattle-men asked the government to get the wells back in working order. The government engaged William Snell to re-condition the stock route. The same Billy Snell who had run cattle on part of the Glen-Ayle lease many years before Henry Ward.

Snell was born in Victoria in 1872. In his youth he came west and set up a store in Leonora. Eight years later he became the first mayor of the town then, in 1907, he gave away the comfortable life of a townsman to become involved in the transport, mining and pastoral industries of Western Australia. With experience in these fields, he was well-qualified to re-condition the Canning Stock Route.

Early in 1929 he began the job from the Wiluna end. By October he had reached Minjoo (Well 35). He repaired and reported on the wells to that point. Wells 25 to 29 he considered destroyed and with no timber available in their immediate vicinity, he was unable to re-construct them. At Minjoo Snell's

supply of replacement iron had run out. He decided his men needed a break and he returned to Wiluna.

In 1930 the government contracted Canning to finish the job. After following up Snell's work, Canning re-conditioned Wells 25 to 29 and carried on to Well 37. With supplies low, he travelled direct to Halls Creek. Re-provisioned, he returned south, re-conditioning Wells 51 to 39 on the way. From Well 39 he continued south to Wiluna and so completed his third out-and-back trip of the stock route.

Canning had continued to work as a government surveyor in Perth and the northern district of Western Australia. He also served on a pasture evaluation board. After a period in retirement Canning died in 1936.

Chud was as good as his word about the maggots. After tea, he spread out a sheet of canvas and laid out our supply of Glen-Ayle meat. He held each piece up to the light and inspected it closely. With a pocket knife, he picked clean the infested strips. He then boiled these pieces in salty water. From a distance, I watched.

"What are you doing with those maggots?" I asked.

"Why? Do you want some for your coffee?"

"Get out, will yuh? I've got to hand it to you, old son. You've got a strong stomach."

"What d'you mean? There's nothing wrong with these little white buggers. So long as they don't get inside you that is. And try to eat their way out," said Chud.

"Aghhh. I'm going to bed."

Next morning we left the track and drove through ten miles of desert oak to Well 37, Libral. As this well is called "haunted", early morning is a good time to visit it. Droving parties rarely camped near it.

As Canning's party reached Wiluna in 1910, having completed the construction of the wells, drovers Shoesmith and Thompson left Billiluna, heading south with the first mob of cattle to use the stock route. At Libral Well the two men were fatally speared by aborigines. Tom Cole, driving the next mob down, noticed cattle from the leading herd drifting back among his own. He found and buried the bodies of the unfortunate drovers - near the haunted well.

When I visited the well in 1967, one of my workmates, Greg Paton, found a piece of tin, about a foot square, inscribed with the message:

"S&T

R.I.P."

The series of holes in the tin which made up the letters had been made with a leather punch. Greg gave the tin to a historical museum near Geraldton.

Another tragedy near Libral in 1922 further enhanced its haunted reputation. In that year a geological party, sponsored by the Locke Oil Development Syndicate, prospected down the Canning Stock Route. A member of their party was killed by aborigines - near Libral Well. We saw a semi-circular piece of troughing metal fixed to a desert oak. The message on this improvised headstone read:

"R.I.P. Sacred to the Memory of W. McLennon who was killed by natives in 1922."

Many of the desert oaks around the haunted well have initials carved in them. I wandered about offering suggestions on whose names the initials represented. My claim that the figures on one tree - T.K. and C.L. 1933 - indicated that Teddy Kennedy and Charles Laughton had visited the well in 1933, was not supported by either Chud or Noel.

The remains of many small birds covered the surface of the water in the well. I did not feel inclined to do a taste test.

We left Libral - and its ghosts - while the sun was still high. Back on the track we threaded our way through another area of saucer shaped dunes. After a slow ten miles we camped beside a large rock outcrop.

When I visited this rock outcrop last year, I saw some faded aboriginal paintings on the southern face. I reported these paintings to the Native Patrol Office in Woomera. They had asked us to fix the rock's position on the Ural 1:250 000 sheet. I led Chud and Noel around to show them the art work.

I was surprised, and a little concerned, to find the paintings faded no longer. In the time between my two visits, aborigines had returned and touched up their work. Previous to this discovery, I had scoffed at the idea that aborigines still lived in this part of the desert.

"Oh yes," Chud mocked me. "So there's no abos out here anymore eh? Who came out and did this? Rolf Harris?"

I stared at the bright, clearly defined paintings.

"What's more important," said Noel, "is how far do you reckon we are from that haunted well? How far as the crow flies?"

"Gee, only about five miles."

"H'mm. As the crow flies would be about the same as the abo walks, wouldn't it?"

Our promise to fix the rock's position entailed spending the night beside it. I'm not saying I was scared or worried about aborigines attacking us, but we did laugh and joke more loudly than usual. For the first time the desert silence seemed ominous, if not threatening. Noel had to point out:

"You know some explorers used to set out their swags around the fire and make them look like they contained a sleeping body. Then they took a blanket and went off into the bush to sleep."

Noel enjoyed the look Chud and I gave him.

"Aren't you going to ask me how many spears they pulled out of their swags in the morning?"

I had never worried about aborigines in this desert, because I had never seen an aborigine in this desert - away from the mission stations. The only evidence of previous habitation, apart from old campfires and faded paintings, were the wells. I thought of this part of the desert as Canning country as well as aboriginal country.

However, my experience is limited to my own travels during the 1960s. The scene was very different before the coming of the white man.

Tribes of aborigines lived in the desert then. Rather than force their way into more hospitable territories, they chose to remain in the desert. I, a winter tourist, carelessly proclaim that I like the desert. How much more this country must have meant to the desert people who lived their entire lives here? Their numbers and life-style did not interfere with the environment. Indeed, the environment constantly threatened the people.

The white man changed all that. He thrust his own values upon the unprepared aborigines. In a couple of generations a civilisation disappeared. Unlike that of the white man, the aborigine's culture is not dominated by material possessions. There were no tablets of stone, no pyramids, no monuments or statues, no written records to survive. Only faded paintings in isolated rock outcrops.

Today's researchers, who require proof based on tangible evidence, can discover very little about the old desert tribes. The relationship of the people to the land which sustained the desert dwellers lived in the minds of men. So, as each old aborigine dies, more evidence of their civilisation is lost.

Thankfully, one legacy of their old world has survived. The aboriginal myths and legends are recorded. As a white man, living in Australia, I find more relevance to my own existence and environment, more wonder and more truth in the tales of the dreamtime, than I do in the heavy-handed drama of Greek mythology which so permeates the literature of my own race.

Beside the newly painted rock, I still did not regard myself as a trespasser. Yet the fact that desert aborigines had recently visited the site unsettled me. My previous conviction that no aborigines lived in the desert was wrong. I did not enjoy the camp. The night was warm. Clouds scudded overhead but there was no breeze. Mosquitoes annoyed me.

Noel was unconcerned. He stomped about in his heavy boots shifting his vehicle's load, positioning his mechanical jack and siphoning petrol from drum to tank. As I lay in my swag the noise of his activity comforted me. I almost dozed off. Then, suddenly, breaking a short silence, I heard a loud whirring noise. Like a bull-roarer or a spear flying through the air. I sat bolt upright in my swag.

"What was that?"

Noel laughed. He stood beside his vehicle with a siphon hose in his hand. Having completed the transfer of petrol, he had waved the hose above his head to clear any drops of fuel from inside it. Noel and Chud had both done this many times since leaving Wiluna. I had heard the associated whirring noise many times. But only at the aborigine's rock did it remind me of a bull-roarer or a spear.

On our next day along the Canning Stock Route we crossed 84 sandridges and saw three wells. But we followed a track all the way, so the day does not rate as memorable.

Number 38 is not a well. It is a rockhole. Wardabunni Rockhole. It lies in a narrow creek bed. Overhanging rocks shelter the water from the sun's rays, slowing the rate of evaporation. Canning's party enlarged the rockhole. We found a pool over 30 feet long, up to six feet deep.

A prominent "H.S.T. 1908" is carved in the rock above the water. Ben Taylor recorded his presence here in 1939, 1943 and 1946. Among several other names Chud found an "A.W.C." However, it is carved so poorly, I do not believe it is Canning's work.

Our visit interrupted the morning drink of several thousand budgerigars. Agitated clouds of these birds swooped and billowed overhead - continually chirping - anxious for us to leave.

We washed. This took some courage in the early morning, with dark clouds above and a cool breeze whistling down the creek bed.

At Well 39, Murguga, beside the track, we stayed only long enough to take photographs.

On the first part of the stock-route Chud and I took our photos from where the vehicle stopped. Noel, with his enormous Praktisix was more careful. He stalked each well, inspecting angles, backgrounds and foregrounds before deciding on his photo-point. By the time we reached Murguga, Chud and I had learnt to wait until Noel had taken his photograph. We then stood in his footprints and took ours.

Various wheel tracks around Murguga indicated that vehicles had come to the well from the north. As we continued in that direction we observed that these visitors had retreated north in a hurry. Their vehicles had left the track on numerous occasions. They had adopted a "rush-em-first" approach to the ridge crossings. In the course of our day's travel we picked up a crow-bar, a plastic jerry can and a telescopic wireless aerial. All these articles had fallen from the fleeing vehicles.

Lake Tobin, which straddles the stock route between Wells 39 and 40, is covered with sand. There are a few small ridges within its bounds. On the northern edge of the lake we found a few drums of aviation fuel. I was reminded of a story Wally Dowling told author Ernestine Hill.

When Wally was driving down the stock-route in 1942 an

aeroplane landed on Lake Tobin to give supplies to an army party deepening the wells. Wally declared that he and the other drovers "cleaned them out of fruit and cream." I can imagine the cattlemen making short work of such delicacies.

Well 40 is named Waddawalla, but we always referred to it as Tobin's Well.

Michael Tobin was one of Canning's most valued men. He and his brother were the drilling experts. In Trotman's account of Canning's men's first trip through the desert in *The Beckoning West*, he attributes many of the funniest quips and smartest sayings - which help maintain morale in a working party - to Michael Tobin.

Tobin also developed a talent for communicating with the desert aborigines. This function was a most important one. Through this contact Canning and his men located native wells.

On the return trip to Wiluna, late one afternoon, Tobin surprised an aborigine at a native well near Waddawalla. The aborigine threw a spear which struck Tobin, but injured him only slightly. Firing his rifle, Tobin chased the native - either to exact information or revenge. The aborigine stopped. As he threw another spear, Tobin raised his rifle and fired. The bullet killed the aborigine, but the spear was already airborne. The ancient weapon proved as effective as the modern one. The spear struck Tobin in the chest and he died early the next morning. The men buried him on the sandridge overlooking Waddawalla.

When Canning's party came up the stock route constructing the wells the following year, they carried a marble cross inscribed: "Sacred to the Memory of Michael Tobin, speared 6.4.07."

The trouble Tobin's workmates took to mark his grave indicates the high regard they had for him. However, I reckon a more fitting tribute is contained in another of Trotman's anecdotes contained in *The Beckoning West*.

When the construction party reached Waddawalla, Canning suggested they move on before camping. He thought the men would not like to spend a night so close to the grave. Tobin's brother, Joe, disagreed.

"Why go on tonight?" he asked. "There's good water and feed and Mick'd like a bit of company."

The body was buried, but the man's personality lived on.

Chud, Noel and myself walked up to look at the grave. We could see the claypan below us, with the well on the western edge. And beyond - north, south, east and west - sandridge crests, endless sand, desert. The spinifex grew higher than Tobin's headstone. The grave is impressive - but insignificant.

Unlike Canning's men, we denied Mick our company and drove on a few miles before camping. Despite the power of the written word and our familiarity

with Canning history, to us, Tobin was no more than a headstone. A man who no longer lives in another man's memory is truly dead.

For tea, we ate Yarrie mutton in preference to the newly cleaned Glen-Ayle beef. I discovered that dried apple, boiled in water and camouflaged with custard, tasted like fresh stewed apple.

After coffee, Chud discussed the significance of 84 ridges conquered in a single day. Then he reflected on Tobin's final resting place. He surprised me. With his back to the fire, hands on hips and staring skywards, he quoted:

"Where the heat waves dance forever, That's where the dead men lie."

He looked at me for a response. "That's not bad. Do you know any more of it?" I asked.

"No. Don't you?"

"No. No I don't."

"Hey Noel. I've got 'im again. He doesn't know *Where the Dead Men Lie*. And to me Chud said, "It's by a bloke named Barcroft Boake. I did it at school. It sure applies to Tobin's grave. It must be one of the loneliest graves in Australia."

Chud repeated the two lines. This time putting more feeling into his voice.

"Sounds better out here than it ever did at school," he said.

"Everything sounds better out here though," I suggested. "Poetry, singing, any artistic expression would sound better out here. It's a bit like you're in a church or something like that. Don't you reckon?"

"Not sure what you mean," he said.

"Well, whenever I'm camped out in the open and ready for the swag and I take a look around and see the country and the sky and all, I feel like saying poetry. Because everything looks and feels so good, I just know whatever I say will sound good. But my trouble is I don't know any poems right through. Just a few lines. Like you."

"Maybe just as well," interjected Noel.

"Oh, I dunno. Last year when I was working along this track with Greg and Clyde, I used to look into the sky at night, see the moon, and I would say, "The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas." That was all I knew of it. And you know Greg, who is a pretty hard-bitten character, reckoned it sounded okay. He wanted me to say more of it. Well, I could only remember a few odd words and when I started thinking about it, I lost all feeling for it and it didn't sound so good. It's something that's got to be spontaneous. Another line I used to deliver every now and then was "There are strange things done in the midnight sun by the men who moil for gold." There's something about Arctic trails that comes in the next bit, but I could never join them up. It was the same as the other line. Even though I didn't know any more, it didn't really matter. What I did know sounded really great.

Out here that is."

I paused. I searched in vain for a trace of understanding in the faces of my two friends. I rushed on.

"Look at Giles. He spruked poetry all the time while he was out in the desert. He may have known a few more lines, but I reckon he was like us. Just felt like saying something because he knew it would sound good."

"But all he said was stale old Pommie stuff," said Noel.

"My Barcroft Boake was an Aussie though," Chud told him.

"Yeah. I should learn some Australian poetry," I said. "For use in the desert. It's more appropriate. But that 'midnight sun' bit isn't Pommie. It's Canadian. A guy named Robert Service wrote it and in a way it applies out here. It's about frontier country or wilderness. An icy wilderness rather than a sandy one, but still a wilderness. That might be why it sounds so good. Yes. It's better than any popular Australian poem about horse races or tramps and swags or bloody bell-birds or ..."

"Okay, okay," said Noel. Noel is a man who likes to get to the bottom of things. "What about the moon being a ghostly galleon? What's that from?"

"Er ... a poem about a highwayman."

"A highwayman, eh? What's that got to do with out here?"

"Nothin', I s'pose. But 'ghostly galleon', you've got to admit it sounds good, doesn't it? And it is what the moon looks like when it breaks clear of a cloud bank. Real poetic. But it's not so much what the words mean, but how they sound."

I dropped my arms to my sides, dug my toes into the sand, and shook my head slowly. Gestures of inadequacy. Frustration. But I carried on.

"Standing here, looking at all this. All the world. The universe and how great it is, I feel impressed. I'd like to be able to sit down and write a poem which would show how I feel about it. But I can't. So the next best thing is to say someone else's poem. Even if it doesn't really apply to what I'm seeing, it still sounds right. I feel I'm responding to what I'm seeing. That I appreciate it. That I know what it's all about."

I stopped, slightly embarrassed, and added, lamely, "Know what I mean?"

Noel wasn't sure. Neither was Chud. But then neither was I.

The next morning we crossed some of the biggest sandridges on the Canning Stock Route. Well 41, Tiru, in their midst, but beside the track, was just another well.

We stopped and inspected the wooden scraper that the National Mapping men had dragged behind their vehicles, to make part of this track.

I spotted a metal jerry can - also fallen from the vehicles fleeing before us. We transferred the two gallons of petrol it contained into the tank of Chud's Land-Rover.

"The bloke driving these vehicles must be blotto," declared Noel.

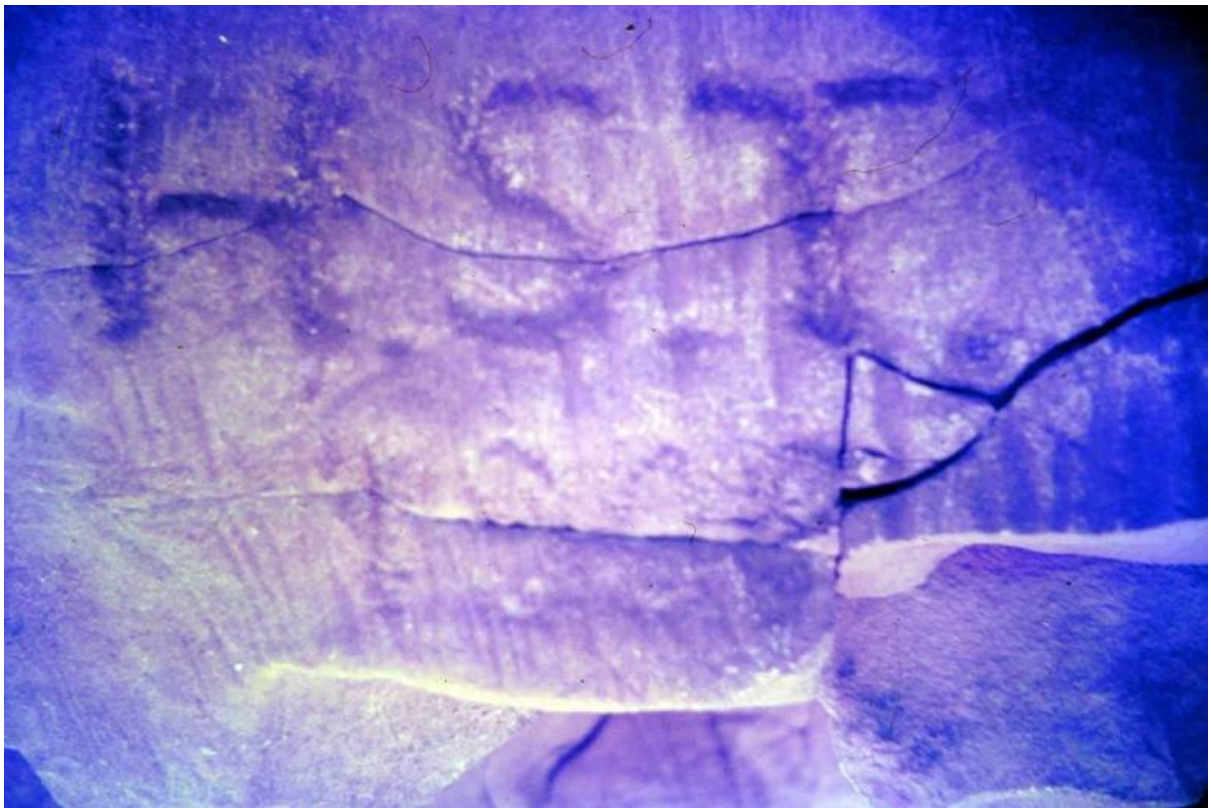
Then we came to a forward control drive Land-Rover parked in the centre of the track. We stopped to inspect it. It belonged to the company that had won the contract to take the gravity readings at the bench marks we had placed last year. The stranded vehicle had no gearbox.

Disappointed to find another vehicle on "our" stock route - even a broken down one - we pushed on to Well 42, Guli Tank. A dingo ran off as we drove up.

Guli is an open pool in limestone rock. The water tasted fine although tinged with green. After photographs we made an accurate stock-take of our fuel and food. Did we have the resources to leave the Canning and go forty odd miles east to try and find Helena?



Budgies at the Haunted Well (37) 1967



At Water 38 - Wardabunni



The budgies queue at Water 38) 1967



The surface of Lake Tobin

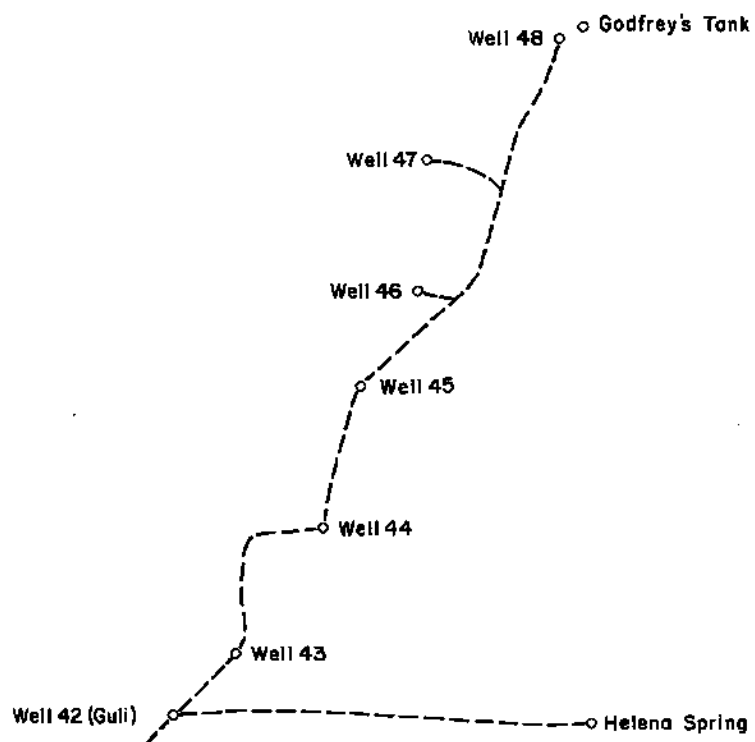


The Well 40 claypan from Tobin's Grave

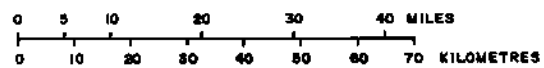


Water 42 Guli Tank

CHAPTER 16



— GULI TO GODFREY'S TANK —



CHAPTER 16

Guli to Godfrey

David Carnegie, the first white man to visit Helena Spring, called it a "Diamond in the Desert." While Lawrence Wells and the men of the Calvert Expedition rested at Separation Well, Carnegie and his men enjoyed the waters of Helena Spring. Whereas Separation Well is less than 20 miles from the stock route, Helena Spring lies nearly 40 miles east of Guli Tank (Well 42).

Chud, Noel and myself knew we had the resources to do an extra 100 miles, but we went through the motions of checking petrol, days and food to make sure. We could do it easily.

Carnegie refers to Helena Spring as his favourite water. Like Giles, Carnegie was a good writer as well as a talented explorer. His book, *Spinifex and Sand*, portrays the author's character as clearly as it describes his travels. I liked him. A visit to his Helena Spring would be like meeting the man himself.

As early as the second page of *Spinifex and Sand* I found myself identifying Carnegie's experiences with my own. Carnegie arrived in Australia in 1892 and, in Perth, when he announced his intention to go to the new goldfields at Coolgardie, he was assured, "Oh, you'll never get there."

During the 1960s, my own requests for information on how to reach out-of-the-way places by a less than direct route received a similar response. In over 70 years only one word had changed. The line I remember most clearly was, "Oh, you'll never get through."

Carnegie travelled to the goldfields. He even found some gold. After an illness he returned to Britain, but in 1896 he came back to Western Australia. Like Wells' Calvert Expedition, Carnegie wanted to travel north from the goldfields in the south to the Kimberleys, filling in the gaps between the east-west crossings of Warburton, Forrest and Giles. He said he was interested in locating a stock route through the region, but his main purpose was to find gold.

As a prospector, Carnegie financed his own expedition. He chose his companions carefully. Godfrey Massie, Charles Stansmore, Joseph Breaden and Breaden's aborigine, Warri, accompanied Carnegie. They left the goldfields in July, 1896, and pushed north into the desert.

The five men steered their camels through the Great Sandy Desert parallel to Wells' route but over 100 miles to the east. A combination of courage, know-how and a low-key approach carried the party safely through. Carnegie used local aborigines - often against their will - to lead him to their sources of water.

Today's 1:250 000 map of the area Carnegie and his men traversed features large tracts of sandridge country. Between the ridges, at regular intervals, are a line of blue dots, identified briefly as "Native Well (P.A.) Carnegie 1896-7." These are the waters he located and very few additions

have been made to the map since. Near the middle of the map named "Helena" is Helena Spring. Carnegie named the spring after his sister.

As we set out from Guli, Chud declared, "It'd be a great find."

I directed Chud to drive into a gap between two sandridges. A gap which I anticipated would lead us to the group of claypans containing Helena Spring.

We camped 20 miles from Guli. Chud cooked his speciality for tea. He called them salmon patties but I reckon they were fish cakes. Naturally, our after-tea topic of conversation was Carnegie. Chud and I had both read an old copy of *Spinifex and Sand* held by the National Library in Canberra. We lamented the fact that copies of Carnegie's book were so rare. The quote before the introduction gives an accurate indication of the style to follow.

"An honest tale speeds best, being plainly told."

Carnegie was 21 when he arrived in Australia. He had trained as an engineer and spent some time on a tea plantation in Ceylon (Sri Lanka). He had no strong background in exploring and little experience of Australian conditions. Despite these deficiencies he successfully traversed some of the most inhospitable regions of the country. Through it all he remained observant of the many new things he saw. He retained his boyish sense of humour, stayed calm under pressure, never lost his enthusiasm for travel and discovery and, fortunately for posterity, he wrote well.

"Civilisation is a fine thing in its way, but the petty worries and annoyances, the bustle and excitement, the crowds of people, the 'you can't do this,' and 'you must do that,' the necessity for dressing in most uncomfortable garments to be like other people, and a thousand other such matters, so distress a bushman ..."

I like that.

The pity is that there were many other talented explorer-prospectors in Australia who may have proved as interesting as Carnegie. However, they never recorded their experiences. Like the men who pioneered the pastoral industry, the early prospectors saw a good deal of Australia before the "official" explorers arrived.

Carnegie, aware of this, wrote:

"The prospector in his humble way slowly but surely opens up the country, making horse or camel pads, here, there, and everywhere, from water to water, tracks of the greatest service to the Government road-maker and surveyor who follow after."

And, "Many are the unrecorded journeys of bushmen, which for pluck and endurance would rank with any of those of recognised explorers."

Next morning we were underway before 6.30 a.m. Five hours later we stopped at the edge of the regular sandridge pattern. Before us lay a group

of small claypans. Over lunch I read out Carnegie's description of the spring's location.

"At the bottom of a hollow enclosed between two sandridges ...a small surface outcrop of limestone ... claypan which abuts on it on the Western side. On the East side ... open space of sand...luxuriant growth of pig face ... tussocks of grass ... ti-tree scrub extending to the foot of the sandhills."

"C'mon. Let's get going." Chud, our party's biggest eater, hurried Noel and myself to finish our meal. We drove into the centre of the group of claypans.

I chose the search area to the north and west. It looked the most promising. I found sandridges, claypans between, a kind of pig face, some tussocks, acres of ti-tree – but no limestone outcrop and no spring. I rushed from one claypan to the next. Hopefully. Eventually I confessed out loud, "I'm too far north."

From the top of a ridge I looked back. I could see the Land-Rovers, but no signal fires so Chud and Noel were still searching. "Right. I'll walk in an arc around to the west and back to the vehicles." In the excitement of the hunt I had lost count of my squares and paces. I found another claypan - between ridges - but still no limestone.

Then, on a ridge crest, I saw smoke rising south of the Land-Rovers. "Damn. One of them have found it." I returned to the vehicles. Chud stood waiting.

"Well?" I asked.

"I'm pretty sure I've found it." Chud's face shone. His efforts to speak casually failed. "It's not much. About the size of a car tyre. Where's Noel? A shallow pool of water. Not very big. There's a claypan on the western side like Carnegie said. Plenty of that pig face stuff. Where is bloody Noel?" He looked around anxiously, before going on. "It'll need digging out. But I think it's alright."

Confronted with Chud's enthusiasm, I could harbour no regret for his having found the spring rather than myself. Noel came up.

"Find it, did you?"

Chud smiled. "I think he has," I said.

"It's over this way. I'll lead the way." Chud rushed to his Land-Rover.

"Not with that tyre, you won't." Noel prodded a flat tyre on Chud's vehicle.

"Hell's bells. Hell's f----n' bells. You wouldn't read about it, would you?" Chud quickly organised the wheel change. Then he led the way, barely half a mile east of our initial stopping point, to Helena Spring.

As Chud had said, the pool was the size of a car tyre. Noel organised Chud and myself to squat beside it for a photograph before we investigated further. I saw little evidence of limestone on the surface but once we started digging our shovels rang against rock. As we threw the sand out, the water came bubbling

up from below - gurgling loudly and encouraging us to greater rate of shovelling.

Carnegie described Helena Spring accurately.

... a little basin, nearly circular, about 2 feet 6 inches in diameter and 3 feet deep, with a capacity of about seventy gallons. This is the spring, fed at the bottom of the basin from some subterranean source by a narrow tunnel in the rock, a natural drain, not six inches in diameter. Through this passage, from the West, the water rises, filling the rocky basin ..."

Along with the sand, we dug out an old pannikin and a rusty tin. We immediately identified these articles as the property of Carnegie.

After cleaning out the cavity, I could feel the "narrow tunnel of rock" with my foot. The water rushed through.

It soon filled the basin, spilled over and trickled out onto the claypan. The water was crystal clear.

Despite a thorough search, we found no trace of any aboriginal camps.

Camping beside a plentiful supply of water in the desert is a novelty. We used the water recklessly. Chud and I engaged in a water fight.

Fresh and clean, after a dip in the spring, we carried out an astro - to fix Helena Spring. My attempts to raise a conversation on Carnegie failed. The natural wonder of this abundant spring in the centre of the desert proved far greater than any human associations.

Chud sat by his swag to record the day's events in his diary. Noel, as always, moved around his Land-Rover reorganising his load. I contemplated the stars of the square of Pegasus. Half-heartedly, I tried to find the outline of a flying horse in the many points of light.

Noel, accidentally, leaned on his Land-Rover's horn. "Toot, toot." I reacted instinctively and shouted, "Up the Sea Eagles."

"What are you on about?" Noel asked. "Who are the Sea Eagles?"

I walked over to him. "Sea Eagles. Manly. My team in Sydney football. Rugby League. Your horn sounded like car horns at the footy. Made me think I was at a game."

Noel wanted to know more. "Manly eh? Are they any good?"

"Are you kidding? Of course they are. Well, not all that good. They've been in the comp about 20 years and never won a grand-final. Been in it a few times though. Maybe this could be the year. They're on top of the ladder. Well, they were when we left Meeka."

"I don't think I've ever heard of your Manly. I don't know much about Sydney League, but don't St George win it all the time?" Noel continued to move around his vehicle. I followed.

"Yes, the mongrels. But they'll go down soon. Manly have beaten them a few times in the last few seasons. They won't last much longer."

"Is that so? Who's your Manly got that's so good?"

"Plenty, mate. Plenty. There's locals like Bob Batty and Freddie Jones, the hooker, who are just coming good. We've got a couple of good big forwards from Brisbane too. But the best news this year is the half and five-eight. Fulton, the five-eight, and the half, Denis Ward, from Canterbury, is top class. And ..."

Noel interrupted. "Canterbury. That's the team my missus follows."

"Then you do know something about Rugby League. You follow the bloody Berries."

"No. Not me. It's my wife. She has sisters who live in Canterbury. They follow them, so she does too. I've got nothing to do with it. I follow East Fremantle."

"East Fremantle? Well I don't know anything about Perth football. What's so great about East Fremantle?"

Noel stopped what he was doing. He sat on the edge of the passenger-side seat and, with the door open, stared hard at me as I leaned against the front mudguards.

"Well, for one thing they've won stacks of premierships."

"How many?"

"Stacks. Over 20. They won it in '65. And they're always in the top four."

"What d'you mean? Always in the top four?"

Noel was adamant. "What I say. They are always in the top four."

"I see. Well how are they going this year?"

"Not all that good." Noel's tone changed. "Actually, they never made the finals last year or the year before. But let me tell you about Bob Johnson. He came across from Victoria and set the club alight. He went to Subiaco, but we've still got plenty of good talent. Trevor Sprigg would be about the best player in the League right now and Melrose..."

Twenty minutes later I knew a good deal about the East Fremantle Australian Rules team - past and present. Noel gave me no opportunity to break in with information about my own team.

At Helena Spring, Noel and I discovered we had something other than an interest in the Canning Stock Route in common. We were both unreasonably one-eyed and fanatical, yet knowledgeable, about our respective football teams.

It was late. Chud shut his diary. He shook his cramped writing hand and moved over to wash up. He looked over at Noel and myself and shook his head slowly.

"How about you guys. Here you are at Helena Spring. Maybe the first white men to see it in 70 years. You could even say we've re-discovered it. A place that lots of people would give their right arm to see. A place we've spent more than a month getting to. A real historic place. Damn near saved Carnegie's life, this water did. All of this. And what do you do? Sit up all

bloody night talking football. I don't believe it. There's gotta be something wrong with you."

Before leaving next morning, I sat down in the spring. The water reached my neck. I waved my arm aloft. "Hurry up and take your photos boys. It's brass monkey cold in here."

The water now contained the bodies of many dead maggots. Following Chud's example with the meat, I flicked them off the surface of each bucketful before pouring it into the vehicles' water tanks.

We began the long drive back to Guli Tank and the Canning Stock Route. Following our outward tracks, with no points of interest along the way and no expectation of a find at the end of the journey, it was a long day.

Mid-morning, I began a long garbled conversation with Chud about one of my school friends who had recently died of cancer. We exchanged half-formed ideas on life and death. We confused each other with conflicting conclusions drawn from similar experiences. The talk became involved. I struggled to express myself and forgot to check that Noel was still coming up behind us. When I did check, I could not see him.

"Probably stopped for a bog," said Chud.

"Maybe. But he usually has one straight after breakfast. Not this time of day."

Chud and I waited. Noel came into view. The headlights of his Land-Rover flashed on and off - continually. We waited for him to come up. He stopped, headlights still flashing.

"We better get back to him," said Chud.

Noel was beside his vehicle when we reached it.

"Righto, what's the big idea? I've had a busted main leaf for about the last ten miles. I've just about buggered my headlights trying to get your attention. Have you looked back? Not bloody once. ..." Noel proceeded to give us "a serve."

Chud and I stood shamefaced. Our eyes fell before Noel's. We had neglected him. He was cranky. A cranky Noel is something to be feared.

However, once he had finished his tirade, Noel returned to his normal self. We ate lunch and then changed the spring. We drove to within seven miles of Guli before sunset. Now that we were within one week of Halls Creek, I could afford to serve more-generous meals.

I recorded in my diary that today was the first time I had felt any trouble in our small party. It had lasted only as long as Noel's harangue, but the one stroke of discord caused me to realise how well the three of us had got on together.

Carnegie, in *Spinifex and Sand* correctly states, "The most important question in the organisation of an expedition of long duration is the choice of one's companions."

In our expedition the choice of personnel occurred naturally. Chud and Noel decided to do the trip. They asked me. I had said yes. I asked Henry. He said no. And that was it.

Chud, Noel and myself discovered that we each wanted to do the same thing: drive the Canning. We came together as equals and the question of a "leader" never arose. We managed without one.

By keeping our party small we lessened the chances of differing opinions causing any conflict. I do not recall a single instance of disagreement over which course of action to follow.

There was no allocation of duties. We soon dropped into a routine which ensured that everything was done. We each had specialised tasks (Chud and Noel with their vehicles and myself with the navigation) but we often played off-sider to each other on these jobs.

Mundane camp duties, which can destroy good relations between old friends, flowed smoothly. No one remained idle while there was anything to do. When Chud and Noel worked on the vehicles, I did the dishes and prepared the camp for breakfast. When Chud and I did astro, Noel carried out these duties and when Noel and I became involved in serious football talk, it was Chud's turn.

There was very little rivalry in our camp. We had overlapping, rather than common, interests. We acknowledged each other's knowledge and ability in the specialised fields and while there were suggestions and discussions, the specialist's opinion prevailed. The only real competition occurred when we searched for wells. Even then we competed good-naturedly and the comparative success of our method of searching was due to team work.

And we enjoyed each other's company.

Mateship is a word that frightens me. I rarely use it. Henry Lawson is the only writer I have read who portrayed it successfully. He described it best through action and conversation rather than attempting a dictionary-like definition. Where mateship exists in a true form, it is not acknowledged in words - there is no need. Indeed, if declarations are necessary, the relationship is less than the real thing. To talk about it, for me, is to belittle or even destroy it.

The night after Helena, I started to read a new book. I read a few chapters and put it aside. Noel watched me.

"What's this one?" he asked.

"*Dodsworth* by Sinclair Lewis. He is a top writer. A Yank. Wrote in the 20's and 30's but he's one guy that I've read about half a dozen of his books and I've liked them all. That's pretty rare for me." I tapped the book with my hand. "Looks like this one's about a car salesman going on holidays."

"A car salesman on holidays? I'll be surprised if you find anything about the

desert or applying to the desert, in it," said Noel.

I was non-committal. "You'd reckon so, but with a good writer like this bloke, you never know. I'll tell you if I find anything."

"Yes. You do that."

Chud and Noel went to their swags. I read on - looking for something.

When they woke next morning, I stood ready, book in hand.

"Listen you guys. I knew old Sinclair wouldn't let me down. He says, and this is only on page 37, 'accelerated sensitiveness is one of the blessings of travel.'"

I waited for a reaction. Chud rubbed the sleep from his eyes. Noel cleared his throat.

"What he means is that you notice more things when you're travelling. You see more that's new to you. You take note of it. You learn more. It's true, isn't it?"

Chud yawned. "Um. Yes. I s'pose so. What's for breakfast?"

We re-joined the stock-route at Guli and drove the easy stage along the track to Well 43, Billowaggi. The well looked good. The troughing and the rails around the well were intact. A large bird recently drowned, prevented a close inspection of the water. On the metal lid of the well, I noticed writing in pencil. "13th (month illegible) 1939 arrived with horses all tired. Ben Taylor."

The plain statement in graphite had survived almost 30 years.

"I feel like Ben Taylor's travelled up the stock route with us, we see his name so often. I sure hope we get to see him in Halls Creek," said Chud.

From Billowaggi the Canning Stock Route runs north-east while the track heads more northerly. We followed the track to a point due west of the map position of Well 44 and after 10 miles of easting we reached it. We had travelled the two sides of a right-angled triangle with the stock route as its hypotenuse.

Much of the timber lining of Well 44, along with the whip-pole, was missing. Yet the troughing timber, larger than usual, had survived. Strange. I could see no rock outcrops nearby, but a large flat stone stood unnaturally upright beside the well. Stranger.

From Well 44 we headed north, planning to re-join the track at Gravity Lakes. We had to make our own ridge crossings again. Track travel had spoiled us. Impatient for a faster rate of progress, we rushed a few ridges. To further delay us, a fuel blockage caused Noel's vehicle to lose power.

We camped in a group of dead trees. I chopped one down and made a good fire. After tea Noel cleaned his Land-Rover's fuel lines while Chud changed the bushes on his rear springs. He proudly showed us how badly they had worn.

"I'll take these back to show the boys at the Land-Rover Club," he said.

I read some *Dodsworth*. This was a true desert camp. My favourite

kind. The only tracks were those we had made ourselves. We could have been anywhere. Truly cut off and alone. I call it a "middle of nowhere" camp. In such a place, stripped of everything but the essential, small pleasures take on an extra significance.

At a leisurely pace, I wandered off into the scrub with the toilet paper. It is a routine I enjoy.

I carry a torch and walk a couple of hundred feet downwind. I do not switch the torch off when I squat. I place it upright beside me, with the light source in the sand. Ready. I take pleasure in performing the essential bodily function. I linger unnecessarily. I look around at the primeval landscape. I feel invisible. A total absence of animal life - to my eye. My eye. The first eye to note, to contemplate. This tree. That particular clump of spinifex. A stick lies near to me. I reach over and pick it up. I put it down. I stare at it. Lying there. Will it ever be touched again before disintegration. To dust. To nothing. Time can be frightening.

I look up and through the trees, over the top of the spinifex, I could see our camp. A light. A fire. Two Land-Rovers. Chud speaks to Noel. Faintly, I hear his voice. Noel answers and moves to his vehicle. I belong to that brave circle of existence. Cosy. My place. A pin-point of light in an ocean of darkness.

I hoist my pants, pick up the torch and kick up some sand.

I dawdle back towards camp. On the outside looking in. I enjoy delaying re-entry. Eventually, I move in. I rinse my hands in the now cold washing-up water.

"How was it?" Chud asks mechanically.

"That's the best part of me gone," I answer.

If the late evening is a time of relaxed pleasure, the early morning brings a mood of invigorating action.

I carried an alarm clock on the stock route but never used it. I never needed to. I always woke at first light. Snug in my swag, I enjoyed several minutes as the sun's rays revealed the desert. The ridge crests first and, gradually, the valleys between. I rose. As long as I had a good song to sing it was easy. Just as moving the limbs stirs the body into motion, so singing a song lubricates the mind.

Like my father, I am not a good singer. But, also like my father, I enjoy singing. I model my own style on his. A style that rarely extends beyond a couple of lines. I can still hear him in the bathroom, at morning, waking me.

"I've come to bide it wealthily in Padua," or

"Ah, sweet mystery of life at last I've found you."

A good first line is a good start to the day. A promise of more to come. Things to happen. My favourite lines differed from my father's but they contained the same note of optimism. On the stock route in 1968, *Man From La Mancha* was new music. I regularly began the day by loudly proclaiming:

"Dulcinea. I see heaven when I see you Dulcinea. Dulcinea-ah" or

"Golden helmet of Lambrino there can be no hat like thee."

Early morning, shower or no shower, is a good time to sing.

Alas, Chud and Noel did not always agree.

"When are you going to learn the second line of that thing?"

"Stop strangling the cat, will you?"

"You sound like you've been poisoned."

Noel had fixed his fuel problem and we made good progress to the Gravity Lakes. We picked up the track and drove to Well 45. The track passed within a few feet of it. Often visited and regularly vandalised, this well did not delay us long.

After Well 45, the track veered east and wound through the rocky hills of the South Esk Tablelands - discovered and named by Carnegie after the home of his father. Subsurface water could not be reached below such country. So, the stock-route runs north from Well 45, through sandridge country.

Our Land-Rovers made good time over the rocky ground. At a beacons hill we turned left from the track and travelled west out to Well 46, Kudarra. We had trouble clearing watercourses issuing from the South Esk hills. They petered out in a wide belt of bloodwood trees. The bloodwoods gave way to mulga, the mulga to sandridges and in a group of white gums we found Kudarra.

Both metal lids were in place over the well which contained good water. Broken pieces of red stone lay in the tall grass. On the western side of the well we found some old camp fires. In a tree nearby several spears had been placed horizontally, criss-crossing to form a small platform on which lay a neatly wrapped bundle of clothes.

Chud unwrapped the bundle. It contained a variety of articles which showed the degree to which twentieth century cosmetics had replaced traditional aboriginal ceremonial tools. Two razor blades, several stones, an old scent bottle, two bones (emu or turkey legs), two tobacco tins - one containing a box of matches and the other some powder (for painting), a tube of toothpaste, a toothbrush, a jar of hair oil and, in a separate parcel tied with string, several spear-head-shaped pieces of wood with patterns etched into them, and a small pair of scissors.

Chud called it a witchdoctor's kit. After taking photographs, we carefully re-wrapped the articles and returned them to their place in the tree. Then hurriedly, almost guiltily, we left.

We camped on rocky ground, back at the point on the track where we had left to go to Kudarra. The hill, with the cairn on it, is called Mt Ford, after a National Mapping surveyor. While H.A. Johnson located the route, Reg Ford had led the party which carried out the geodetic survey.

During the day Noel had sent a telegram, via the Derby Flying Doctor

base, to his wife in Perth. He assured her that we had now reached the comparative safety of the South Esk Tablelands. As he said to us around the campfire, "This trip is damn near over."

"Hang on," I said. "You're the one saying it's not over till Halls Creek all the time. We've still got Godfrey Tank and Breaden Pool to find. The rest of the South Esk to see and four or five wells. It's still more than a hundred miles to Billiluna."

"That all?" said Chud. "We're in the bloody suburbs."

"That's not what Bill Kennedy said when he was down here," I reminded Chud.

"Sure. But when was that? 1956. Things are a bit different now."

Bill Kennedy, one of our boss surveyors in Canberra had told Chud and myself of his visit to the South Esk Tablelands. He described the hills and told us of explorers' names carved into the rock at Godfrey Tank. In 1956 it had been a daring venture for Bill and his men to drive so far south of Billiluna, to the edge of the desert, almost into it. Their Land-Rovers may have made some of the first motor vehicle tracks into the region.

Yet now, coming up from the south, we regarded the same country as safe. The frontier had receded a long way in a dozen years.

"Isolation is not what it used to be."

"In another dozen years, Helena Spring will be as often visited as Godfrey Tank is today."

In the morning we continued north along the track. We crossed a few wide ridges. The sand was loose. Loosened by traffic. We came to Mt Romilly: named by Carnegie after one of his brothers-in-law. By the time he had reached this area, Carnegie had discovered and noted so many landmarks he had exhausted his supply of immediate relations' names.

At Mt Romilly, once again we turned left (West) from the track to find Well 47. And, once again, we tangled with creek beds on the edge of the stoney country. We skirted a claypan containing red water. I located a sandridge which we travelled/beside for nearly ten miles and at its end, exactly where the map indicated, we found Well 47.

There was no whip-pole but the windlass and bucket were in working order. Chud pulled up some water. It contained many wrigglers and tumblers (mosquito larvae). Active and voracious ants caused us to rush our lunch and begin the drive back to Mt Romilly.

I tried to make the return trip more direct. I failed. My efforts added another mile to the journey. Back at Mt Romilly and the track, we stopped for a smoko.

Noel leaned against the front mud-guard of his vehicle. He looked over

the bonnet at me.

"You know," he said, "that was a bit of a bore. It's been a great trip. Just what I wanted to do. But I won't be sorry to see Halls Creek."

Chud and I disagreed. We did not want the Canning to end. But the end was near. Tonight, tomorrow night on the stock route and then we would be sleeping in Halls Creek.

As we drove north along the track my thoughts strayed from the Canning Stock Route and our journey. For the first time, I began to contemplate a more distant future. Next year. What would I do? Was I now ready to spend a winter at home? I wonder what field trips will be on? Could I try to play football again?

The hills containing Godfrey Tank came into view. The same hills Chud and I had driven down to with the drum of Billiluna petrol. A long time ago: two months. We drove around the flat-topped sentinels standing clear of the main outcrop and entered our fuel dump canyon. Low bushes lashed the sides of our Land-Rovers. The drum of petrol stood undisturbed. Our tanks still contained sufficient fuel to enable us to reach Billiluna, but Chud declared:

"Better to have too much than not enough."

We siphoned the petrol from the 44 gallon drum into the Land-Rovers. It was late afternoon.

"Let's go round into Breaden Valley. It'll put us close to Godfrey's Tank. You never know we might be able to camp on water," I said.



Arrival of morning sunlight



Evening on the spinifex

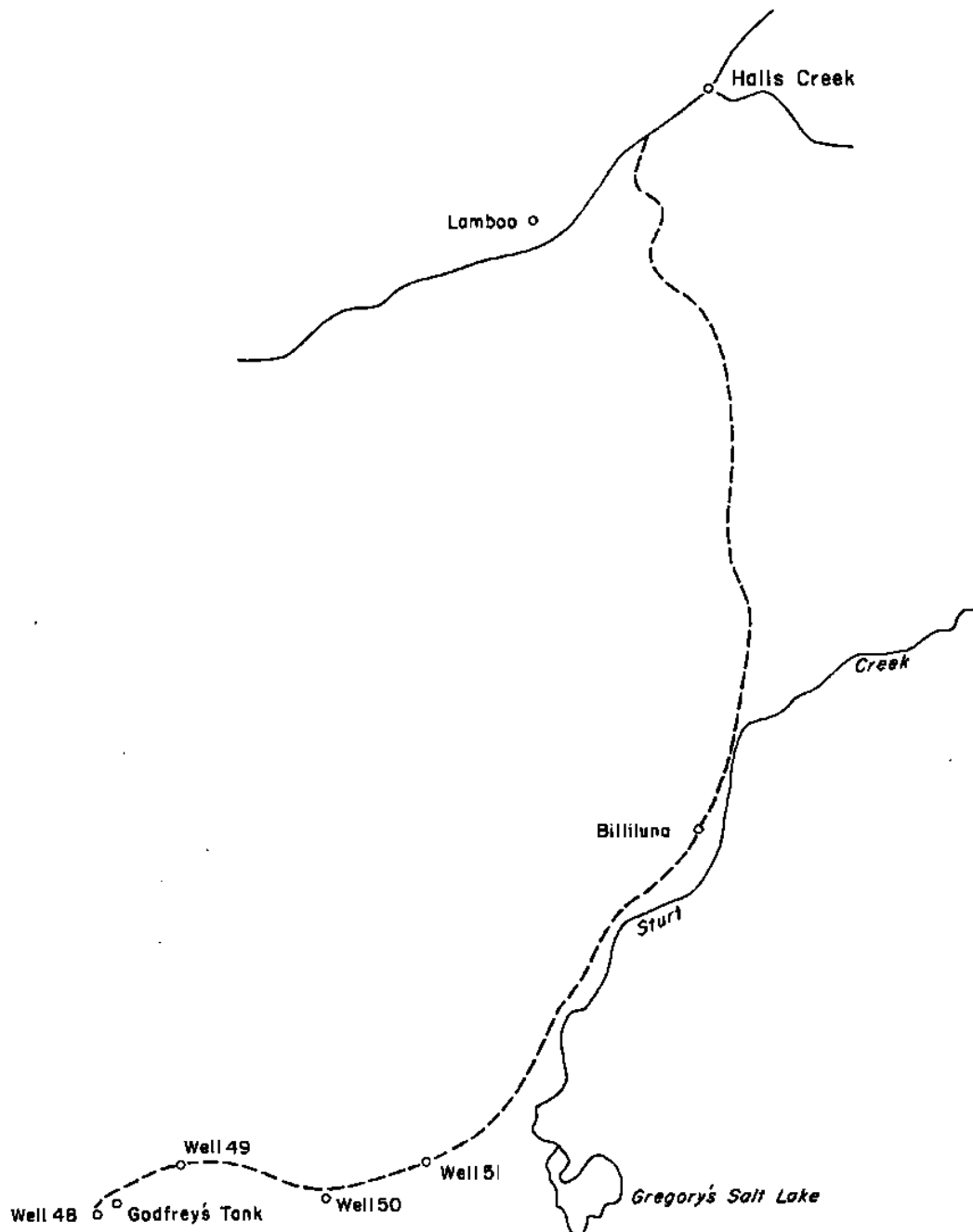


Sunset on a sandridge

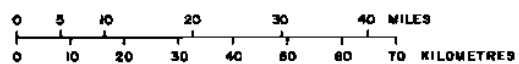


Godfrey Tank

CHAPTER 17



— GODFREY'S TANK TO HALLS CREEK —



CHAPTER 17

Godfrey Tank to Halls Creek - and Beyond

We did not camp on water. We came to clearly defined creeks but the grass on their banks had grown up to six feet high during the good season. Using an aerial photograph of the area, I directed Chud and Noel up the watercourse that contained Godfrey Tank. We camped beside a rock wall where the creek bed entered a narrow gorge and prevented our vehicles going any further. The creek contained several pools of fetid water (breeding grounds for mosquitoes) while the rock wall sheltered us from the wind. A wind would have discouraged mosquitoes.

Our "Stew for the Night" contained the last of the Glen-Ayle beef. This item, more than any other in our tucker-box, kept our appetites in check along the Canning Stock Route. Tinned meat manufacturers try hard but all tinned meats taste the same in a stew. Salted beef, even demaggoted salted beef, gives body to a stew. It transforms slush into something you can bite on. With the added ingredient of curry powder, Chud went as far as classifying our stews as "not bad."

After tea we slapped mosquitoes. With lights out early I stood in the campfire smoke and listened to the radio. I heard a session of "non-stop" dance music. James Last and his band swung through the hits of 1967. The orchestral music bounced off the rock wall behind me, down into the valley below. Infectious rhythms. My hips could not resist. Discreetly, I gyrated along with James and his band.

Then, in a blaze of static and interference, I recognised the introductory drone of *A Whiter Shade of Pale*.

"Daah - dada dada dada daah – dah dada dah – daah daah..."

"Top number this," I advised Chud and Noel.

A Whiter Shade of Pale had been my favourite working song along the stock route during the previous year. It's a strange song. Within each sentence the words make sense but overall - I'm not too sure. A slow rock, almost haunting, rhythm slowly builds up to brim over in an all-knowing couplet chorus.

"And so it was that laterrr, as the miller told his tale, that her face at first just ghosting, turned a whiterrr shade of pale."

Chud and Noel were not impressed.

"It was my favourite song for 1967," I told them.

"You can't have heard much music then," said Chud.

"Rubbish, I heard plenty. I put the radio up many nights while I was in base camp. I knew all the hits. I used to tell Greg and Clyde that I'd go down in history as the man who brought pop-music to the Canning Stock Route."

"That's nothing to be proud of if that thing was any example."

I did not persevere with my argument. Yet I liked the idea of being responsible for modern hit-parade music rolling down the rocky creek beds to the ancient water-holes or drifting out from our camp to be lost among the sandridges.

A few minutes of noise in the desert air is hardly permanent. But how less permanent than our wheel tracks or our survey marks. How permanent is the stock route itself? Maybe it is more clearly defined than it was fifty years ago. In another fifty it may be a bitumen highway.

But I only think of years in fifties or hundreds or, sometimes, thousands. In the desert scale of time the epochs of man are but a moment. Out here time is measured in millenniums. In the infinite desert future the age of man may have shrunk to the brevity of a song.

The distance to the nearest star is so great that to us, here on earth, all the stars appear the same distance away. Similarly, in a millennium or two, while the desert survives, the difference between a song and the age of man will be negligible.

The Procol Harem's *A Whiter Shade of Pale* wafting over the desert from my radio will be no more ephemeral than the history of the Canning Stock Route or the history of Australian exploration or the history of Australia or - the history of man.

In the morning I pulled on my black T-boots in expectation of the rocky ground we had to cover to find the three rock-holes in this, the northern-most section of the South Esk Tablelands.

We walked up the main water-course, detoured into a tributary coming in on the left (north) to inspect Kunningarra Rockhole, and then followed the main stream to its termination at Godfrey Tank. Boulders and vegetation in the creek bed obstructed our way.

At Godfrey we found several pools of water but none big enough to swim in. The largest was below the vertical rock wall that is the main attraction of Godfrey Tank. The wall is carved with the names of visitors.

The position of honour is held by a large "C" with "96" inside it. Carnegie visited here in 1896. Immediately below is "H.S. Trotman 1906". Nearby is Canning's official survey mark "C23" below a broad arrow. The work is professional. The lettering is of a high standard and fine guide lines are visible in the rock surface.

After the explorers came the drovers. The dates beside their names are in the 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s - Harris, Hill, our "old friend" Ben Taylor, and other drovers whose names we had come across lower down on the stock route.

Then came the four-wheel drive travellers - surveyors first. I was pleased to see our Bill Kennedy's name. The year of his visit, 1956, made him one of the first of this category to record his presence at Godfrey Tank.

I pointed his name out to Noel. "See, our good old Department of the Interior was leading the way."

"Almost," said Noel, indicating the date beside the name of a Western Australian government surveyor. It was very close to the names of Carnegie and Trotman. The lettering was of a lower standard.

"What a mess. You'd reckon if he wanted to be up there with Carnegie and Trotman he'd have made a better job of carving his name than that."

Noel defended the West Australian. "No worse than your effort on the rock at Durba. Remember the three 'l's?" he said.

Of course, after the surveyors came the tourists. As is the way of tourists, the most recent visitors were the more numerous and more inclined to use large lettering. Of course, the aborigines, whose home it had been for generations, felt no need to record their presence. I climbed over rocks to a point where my photograph would include only the names of Carnegie and Trotman. Chud took the same picture. "History carved into the rock" he called it.

He felt a little contemplation was called for.

Carnegie named the rockhole after his friend and fellow-traveller, Godfrey Massie, the man who found it. Canning, ten years later, found evidence of a fellow-explorer (Carnegie) here. Probably his first sign of a white man since Separation Well. (Canning also visited Lawrence Wells' Separation Well on his first trip through the desert). Carnegie arrived at Halls Creek in 1896 with the search for Wells and Jones and Joanna Spring in full swing. Unaccountably, Carnegie's offer to assist in the search was refused.

"It's more like a network of history," I suggested to Chud.

We climbed out of the "tank" and walked south across the rocky surface to the watercourse containing Breaden Pool (Canning's plan has Breaden Pool marked as Kunningarra). The water here was stagnant and covered with a grey scum. Lengths of pipe ran from the pool down the valley, about a hundred yards, to a set of troughs. Breaden Pool is more easily accessed than Kunningarra or Godfrey Tank. It became a popular watering place for cattle.

From Breaden Pool we walked back to the vehicles and last night's camp. We drove back out of Breaden Valley into the open country to look for Well 48. I fixed the well's map position in relation to the hills I could see. We drove to that position but found no well.

Pointing out the window to the hills and referring to points on the map, I explained it to Chud.

"You see that one there is this one here. That one over there is this one. That puts the well right here. And that's where we are."

After only a few head scratches Chud disagreed. "Hang on. Isn't that

one this one here and that one there this one? That puts us here and the well over there." He drove off confidently.

I studied the map to check his deductions. Chud was right. I looked up.

"Hold it Stop:" I shouted, dropping the map and reaching for the dashboard. Chud braked and my body pitched forward.

The Land-Rover came to rest on the edge of a depression about 20 feet square and varying in depth from two to five feet. The depression contained the remains of Well 48. A few troughing timbers and the well completely silted up with no trace of water. Between the well and the hills we found an old, but large, camp site. Perhaps the well had been over-used and pumped dry.

Before we left Noel commented: "This well is a bit different. We didn't find it. It found us. You damn near drove into it."

As we continued north and then east, the track became clearer and wider. Chud edged the speed up to 40 m.p.h. We stopped at Well 49, Lumba, for lunch. The water tasted fine. We filled the water tanks, washed ourselves and some clothes.

There is another bush grave at this well. A cook named Smith died and was buried here in 1939.

We left the track, which now headed due east, and visited Well 50. Chud and I amused ourselves throwing stones at two snakes lying between the well timbers. Despite a couple of direct hits the snakes refused to move. They were desert snakes. They knew our presence was temporary. Ephemeral. We would soon tire and go away.

"One well to go, is it?" asked Chud.

"We might as well check it out before we camp."

Travelling east we came to large pools of water: overflow from Sturt Creek. The track turned north but we continued east looking for the well. I saw a windmill in the distance and heading towards it, we picked up a set of wheel tracks which took us to the mill. It was not in working order. Remains of troughing timber and metal of familiar shapes indicated that a Canning well had once existed at this spot.

"Okay boys, that's it. We can go home now. The Canning Stock Route from here to Halls Creek is a line of water-holes. Right now it might be one big waterhole."

The Sturt Creek overflows had added many detours to the Billiluna track. We followed north-bearing ones. I saw a black stallion, a pelican and two brolgas. When viewed through the dead trees the large expanses of blue water gave the area an everglade appearance.

"We're out of the desert now," said Chud.

We camped on a clear stretch of dry mud between two pools. Anticipating a mosquito attack we made a big fire, put up our nets and then, to our surprise, no mosquitoes showed up.

"We scared the bastards off," said Chud.

Naturally, our last camp on the Canning was tinged with sadness. We planned to call in at Billiluna tomorrow morning and then go on to spend the night in Halls Creek. The three man relationship and its accompanying routines that we had established on the trip would break down in the presence of other people. Our total reliance on each other would be gone. To savour the last moments I poured out the final one-third of my bottle of rum. There were no toasts or speeches. I could already feel the proximity of the outside world. Inhibitions returned. I thought carefully about what I said. The conversation was sporadic. No topic endured.

"You always remember the first and last camp of each trip," quoted Chud.

"Yeah, remember how confident we were on that first night out of Wiluna. Looking at the clouds and worrying. Not game to tell anyone we were out to drive the stock route," I said.

"I admit I didn't think we were going to get far back there," said Noel.

"Never mind. We did it didn't we?" declared Chud.

Again, Noel held us in check. "Wait a minute. Halls Creek is the end of the stock route. Wiluna to Halls Creek, remember? We're not there yet."

"You're right. There's many a slip twixt the cup and the lip. When Carnegie and his mates reached this latitude and were just starting to enjoy the easy going, well, that's when Stansmore accidentally shot himself. Dead. How would you be? To travel all that way together. Through all that danger. Only to die by accident in almost civilised country. They'd all become such good mates in the desert and just when the celebrations should have begun, bang, one of them is dead. I remember Carnegie writing about it. He reckons he wept. I damn near cried myself, just reading about it. Talk about tough." I shook my head in commiseration.

"Hell Russell, don't wish something like that on us," said Noel. He was almost angry with me.

I had killed any chance of further conversation.

Chud cooked his salmon patties. I made a damper. Noel changed a tyre. We had run out of sugar so we drank our coffee with honey.

Some mosquitoes arrived. In my swag I tried to read but couldn't concentrate. I put the book down and turned off the light. A breeze had sprung up, cool from the Sturt Creek waters. I pulled back the mossie net and looked up at the stars. I didn't feel like identifying any. I lay there - not thinking about anything - listening to the breeze. Chud was right. I would not forget this, our last night on the Canning Stock Route.

"Okay boys. Rise and shine. We gotta go to town today."

As we approach Billiluna I reminded Chud, "When Canning arrived at Billiluna on his 1930 well re-conditioning trip, he found out that Phar Lap had won the Melbourne Cup. I guess I'll find out that Manly are on top in the Sydney comp."

"I wouldn't count on it," said Chud.

"What? On finding out or their being on top?" He was not interested enough to answer.

We pulled up at Billiluna in time for morning smoko. I was disappointed to learn that, Jerry, the manager, was out mustering.

His wife expected us. "Jerry said you boys'd be coming through this week."

I didn't ask about the football.

Jerry's wife introduced us to a man wearing a safari suit. He looked too well-dressed for Billiluna. He talked a great deal but I could not discover why he was at the station. This type of man is often met with on the road: the been-everywhere, done-everything, knows-everyone type of man. Chud soon sorted him out.

He: So you're the blokes driving the stock route.

Chud: Yes, that's right.

He: I've been down that way a fair way myself.

Chud: Oh yes, how far?

He: A couple of wells past Godfrey's tank.

Chud: What, to 46, Kударra?

He: Aw, I don't remember the numbers or names. I know that country pretty well though. I've been to Godfrey's tank a couple of times.

Chud (getting suspicious): Is that right? Did you put your name on the rock?

He: Naw. Didn't bother. I was in a hurry.

Chud: You didn't camp at Godfrey then?

He: Sure I did. A couple of times. Right beside the water. It's a great spot.

Chud (getting devious): What sort of vehicle were you in?

He: Land-Rover.

Chud (feigning puzzlement): But you can't drive to Godfrey Tank.

He knew Chud had found him out. He knew we knew. But he blushed only slightly and tried to carry on.

He: No. Hell no. I mean I camped as close to it as I could get the Rover.

Chud (going in for the kill): How close was that?

He (backing off): Aw, you know. I forget exactly. It was a long while ago.

Jerry's wife asked a young aboriginal stockman to have smoko with us. He wore a red shirt, moleskins and high-heeled riding boots. He didn't say anything. I tried in vain to draw him into a conversation. I delivered Henry Ward's message to him.

"Now listen. If any unbranded cattle wander into Billiluna from the south, don't go putting your brand on them. Henry Ward of Glen-Ayle said to tell you they'd all be Glen-Ayle stock and that he'd be up to collect them."

The young man's face lit up in a smile. His eyes and teeth sparkled but he repressed outright laughter. He enjoyed the cattleman's joke but still he did not speak.

On the drive from Billiluna to Halls Creek I paid little attention to the landscape. We stopped for lunch in a creek bed. Water trickled over the crossing. We shaved, washed and changed into clean clothes for the "big smoke."

We joked about a civic reception and the mayor of Halls Creek offering us the key to the town.

"Remember old Giles," I said. "When he rode his camels into Perth after coming from the east. It didn't go quite as he expected. He anticipated meeting civic leaders and all but in the city streets his camel played up. He had to ride up into a side street to calm him down. His second-in-charge, Tietkins, led the procession in and acknowledged the cheers of the crowd. They thought he was Giles. I think Giles got there in time for the civic reception."

Halls Creek, like Marble Bar and Wiluna, is an old gold-mining town that has survived as a centre for the pastoral population and transients. The town is now west of the original site but the adjective "new" is not a word that comes to mind when talking of the present Halls Creek.

Nevertheless, I looked with interest at the houses either side of the road as we drove down that part of the Northern Highway which is the main street of Halls Creek. Land-Rovers were common - even dirty ones with interstate number plates. Ours was no different from several others parked in front of the post office. We sent telegrams to Glen-Ayle, Yarrie, Eleanor Smith and our office in Canberra advising them all that we had arrived in Halls Creek. Noel rang his wife.

We sat in the vehicles and read our letters from home. "How's Manly going?" asked Noel.

"Equal second. They've beaten Saints again but now bloody Souths are on top. How's your mob goin'?"

"Just so-so."

Down at the pub we joined other tourists and some local drinkers. There was no draught beer, only stubbies. We sipped our beer and looked around at the others. They looked at us like we were main road tourists. We - who had just driven up the Canning.

We dined at the hotel. A salesman who assured us that he "knew the north" sat at our table. He told us how fast he could drive, how many cars he'd wrecked, how many donkeys he'd shot, how many barramundi he'd caught, how many snakes he'd killed, how many aboriginal women he'd

known intimately, how many Japanese cars he'd sold and generally, how successful he was.

It was not until we prepared to leave the table, Chud had an opportunity to speak. "Can you tell me anything about the Canning Stock Route? Where it runs from or how long it is?"

"The Canning? Sure, I know it. It runs from Billiluna out to Wallal, on the coast near Hedland."

"I see," said Chud. We let him go. He had an appointment.

We returned to the bar and played darts and the juke box. Almost drunk, we drove a few miles out of town to camp. We lit a fire and put the billy on.

"Okay," said Noel, between sips of coffee, "now that the trip is over you must have some words of wisdom. Some overall impression. Some conclusion or something you've learned."

"I dunno." I looked at him over the fire. "I dunno. It's all a bit of an anti-climax, really. Getting here. Doing what we said we would and all. But no one here seems to know or care about the Canning. All the talk's about the Kimberleys and the Top End of the Territory. Not like at Wiluna where every second person has some story about the stock route to tell you. You know the last few nights I've been lying awake thinking about how great it had been to drive up the Canning, find Separation and Helena and all the wells. And being the first to do it. Real satisfaction. But here in Halls Creek we're just another bunch of tourists."

"I know what you mean," said Noel, "but really, all we are is just another bunch of tourists."

"Yes. I guess that's what makes it an anti-climax. We're just like anyone else in Halls Creek. We got here, safe and sound. It can't have been any big deal. There were no real hassles. We were never in any real danger. We just plugged on up. I guess anyone could've done it."

Chud knew what I meant. "That's it. We haven't tamed the desert or anything and, because we made it without any real trouble, without making any headlines, it just goes to prove it can't have been too hard to do in the first place," he said.

"What d'you think then? We should have got into some trouble along the way to prove that it wasn't easy."

Noel was no longer listening. Having thrown the dregs of his coffee on the fire he was preparing for bed. Chud, staggering slightly, moved across to unroll his swag.

"I've got a bit of a head ache," he said. I didn't feel all that well myself.

We did not stay long in Halls Creek. Noel wanted to go home as quickly as possible. After servicing our vehicles we gave him enough food from the tucker-box to last him to Perth. Chud and I each shook his hand,

firmly. I looked him in the eye. "See you," I said.

"Yeah, see you. Look after yourselves." He said it casually but we knew he meant it. Our stock route days together had irrevocably linked our lives together. Such links require no exposition or elaboration but as we watched Noel's Land-Rover disappear down the road, Chud said, softly, "He's a bloody good bloke."

"And we'd have been stuffed without him," I added.

Ben Taylor's property, Lamboo, was on the western side of town. We drove out and at the turn-off some men were yarding cattle. I asked one of them if he knew Ben Taylor.

"You mean the boss? He's over there. Want to see 'im? He's pretty busy."

"Er ... I'd like to. We won't keep him long. Tell him we're friends of Henry Ward. Of Glen-Ayle."

From the dust behind the yards a man appeared. A cattleman. He squatted on his heels beside our Land-Rovers.

I began by delivering Henry's message: his youngest son, Pete, would be up to work with him next year. That was okay. Ben Taylor spoke softly and reticently until the talk turned to the Canning Stock Route. Then his voice betrayed enthusiasm. Enthusiasm for his droving days. And he knew the stock route.

He knew Billy Snell and reckoned the re-conditioning party was in bad shape when they turned back from Well 35 in 1929. Ben saw the plane land on Lake Tobin in 1942 - picked up a man named McKenna. Ben had met Bill Johnson (the National Mapping surveyor) near Christmas Creek after he had driven his International up from Well 35. The Halls Creek baker (from whom we had purchased bread) was the brother of Mal Brown, the last man to take a mob down the stock route. Ben called him the space-age drover. The wife of the publican at Halls Creek had been married to Moody, one of Canning's men, Ben told us.

I asked him about the pencil message on the lid of the well at Billowaggi. "Horses all tired." Did he remember?

He smiled and shook his head. "You don't say. I don't recall writing it, but I guess I did. I used to do things like that back then."

Of course, Chud and I managed to work into the conversation the fact that we had driven up the stock route - the entire length in one concerted effort. Ben took cognisance of the fact but said nothing at the time.

After nearly half an hour of stock route talk, Ben looked up at the sun and then across at the yards.

"I gotta be going," he said and stood up. "You know," he added, "you blokes must be the first to drive the stock route all the way. Wiluna to Halls Creek. In one go."

He returned to his work.

Back in the Land-Rover, I said to Chud, "Well, that'll do me for a civic reception."

Chud and I returned to Halls Creek and then drove north to the headwaters of the Ord. We passed through Bedford Downs and Tablelands, crossed the Hann River, to Glenroy and Mount House. We turned north to Gibb River, crossed the Durack River, visited the deserted Karunjie homestead and came down the range to the rivers which flow into Cambridge Gulf. After leaving the rough, rocky country we crossed the Pentecost River, with the majestic Cockburn Ranges in the distance, and drove into Wyndham, four days after leaving Halls Creek.

After some draught beer we decided to go to the Drive-In. We saw *Von Ryan's Express*. I really enjoyed it.

Frank Sinatra and Trevor Howard are in a P.O.W. camp in Italy. Frank is happy to stay put and wise-crack away the rest of the war, but Trevor Howard is a dedicated British officer who considers it his duty to escape. The verbal conflict between the two gives the first half of the movie a light-hearted flavour. This accentuates the drama later in the movie when Howard forces Frank to participate in his escape plans. With their men they travel by train through Italy towards the Alps and Switzerland. The opposite types share adventures and narrow escapes. They come to respect and then like each other.

In the final scene Sinatra is not on the train when it begins to move off. Stoic Trevor Howard is on the platform at the rear of the last carriage. He calls to Sinatra to run and jump aboard. He will help him up. The train is only moving slowly. The train picks up speed. Howard's pock-marked face shows concern. The camera moves to Sinatra's face. The expression on it changes from casual to distress to one of panic. He is running hard. The gap between the running man and the receding train increases. Howard stretches out his arm, desperately. Sinatra falters. Shots are fired. Howard frowns, then gasps as Sinatra stumbles and falls, face forward in the tracks. Howard's face portrays agony, sorrow. Suddenly - he and the platform and the carriage disappear into a tunnel. Smoke billows out. Then nothing.

THE END.

A moment of tragedy. It thrilled me. I was moved.

Chud and I went fishing in Arnhem Land and then drove south. I arrived home on 1 September 1968 and resumed work in Canberra the next day.

Manly qualified for the grand-final. Stan and I drove down to Sydney for the game. Manly were unlucky.

To begin with, Souths won the toss and ran with the wind behind them in the first half. Even with this advantage the Manly tacklers kept them from scoring a try until late in the first half - and that try was against the run of play: with Manly attacking the ball went loose. The bounce

favoured a fleet-footed Souths winger. He caught the Manly men off-guard and raced two-thirds of the length of the field to score. Stan and I groaned. At half-time Souths led by eleven points to two.

Souths cool-headed, keen-eyed, sure-footed full-back kicked another goal early in the second half. Then Manly came to life. A grand team try, a goal and a field goal and the score had narrowed to thirteen points to nine. A quarter of an hour to go. There was still time.

My lasting memory of this game is the face on the Sydney Cricket Ground scoreboard clock. I could not stop glancing at it - I even missed some of the play. Alas, the score remained at thirteen points to nine.

The newspapers reported the grand-final as a great game of Rugby League and that anyone who saw it should consider themselves fortunate to have witnessed the match. No way. If Manly are beaten the result can only be unsatisfactory. And we went so close. Each team scored one try. South's goal-kicker had a better day than Manly's. It was as simple as that.

After the game Stan and I dawdled back to Central Railway Station. We ate lukewarm pies in the small, grimy park nearby.

About six weeks later Rain Lover won the Melbourne Cup - easily. I backed three horses: Impetus, Arctic Coast and Balholmen Star. At no time did any of these horses look like figuring in the finish. So there was no competition. Nineteen sixty-eight was clearly the year of the Canning Stock Route.



Chud and Noel and the Rovers at Halls Creek



Self, spinifex and sand

EPILOGUE

Numerous scenes of which I had no previous conception have dawned upon me - I hope to the enlargement of my mind, and the improvement of my understanding. If I have done but little good, I trust I have done less harm, and that none of my adventures will be other than a source of amusing and pleasant recollection to me in the decline of life.

Charles Dickens
Pickwick Papers

Since Then

Since 1968 the Canning Stock Route has been comprehensively covered. I have read many reports (often conflicting), heard many claims (often followed by counter-claims) and studied many restatements of established fact (often inaccurate) concerning the Canning. After a study of my collection of stock route literature, randomly filed in a beer carton, three expeditions stand out: the walkers, the army and the restorers.

In 1976 Murray Rankin, Cathy Borman and Rex Shaw walked the length of the Canning Stock Route. They left Halls Creek in July and although they reached Wiluna a couple of months later, the expedition had been several years in the making.

Rankin first came to Wiluna and the Canning Stock Route in 1972 and headed north. Rankin, a New Zealander and an experienced walker did not get to Halls Creek. However, on this expedition he worked out what he had to do to walk the Canning. In 1976 he came back and did it.

The army approached the Canning in a very different way.

Blair Healy, a staff cadet at the Royal Military College, Duntroon in 1976, heard of the Canning Stock Route from his father who lived in Geraldton. Blair chose a stock route trip as a final year project in his officer training course. I helped Blair and his fellow cadets in the early planning stages of their trip. The hardest part of this expedition was the difficulty the young men had persuading their superior officers to approve it.

However, once approval was granted no expense was spared. It was the best equipped and best organised expedition to drive the Canning. The army could not afford to fail where civilians had succeeded. To place themselves beyond 'tourist class' the army made their journey in summer. They spent Boxing Day 1976 crossing sandridges near the middle of the Canning Stock Route.

The restorers came to the Canning in 1983 - the 75th anniversary of its creation.

David Hewitt, an amateur historian and experienced stock route traveller, organised the restoration - to working order - of Well 26 and the construction of a monument at the same well.

The time and effort associated with the organisation of this expedition was far greater than that required to actually carry it out. The restoration committee received assistance from over 50 different individuals and organisations.

So now there is a fitting memorial to Canning on the Canning Stock Route. The monument beside the restored well consists of a replica of a water tank of the type carried by camels. Inserted in the stonework are two plaques.

One is engraved with the message:

TO COMMEMORATE THE 75TH ANNIVERSARY YEAR OF THE COMMENCEMENT OF CONSTRUCTION OF THE CANNING STOCK ROUTE. WELL 26 (TIWA TO THE ABORIGINAL PEOPLE) WAS RESTORED IN JULY 1983. 23 FEET DEEP WITH TIMBERING TO 10 FEET. THIS WELL WAS REPORTED BY ALFRED W. CANNING TO MAKE 2000 GALLONS AN HOUR OF EXCELLENT WATER. RECONDITIONING OF DAMAGED WELLS ON THIS STOCK ROUTE WAS ALSO CARRIED OUT IN 1929/30 BY TWO PARTIES. ONE LED BY WILLIAM ALBERT SNELL AND THE OTHER BY ALFRED W. CANNING WHO WAS 68 AT THE TIME. THE WELLS WERE AGAIN RESTORED IN 1942 AS A POSSIBLE WARTIME EVACUATION ROUTE FOR KIMBERLEY RESIDENTS. FURTHER MAINTENANCE TO SOME OF THE WELLS WAS CARRIED OUT AS LATE AS 1949.

The other features a portrait of Canning and:

ALFRED WERNHAM CANNING

1861-1936

EXPLORER AND SURVEYOR

THIS 900 MILE STOCK ROUTE WHICH NOW BEARS HIS NAME WAS SURVEYED BY ALFRED W. CANNING IN 1906-7 AND THE 51 WELLS BETWEEN HALLS CREEK AND WILUNA CONSTRUCTED IN 1908-10 UNDER HIS OUTSTANDING LEADERSHIP.

CONCEIVED TO OVERLAND KIMBERLEY CATTLE DIRECT TO EASTERN GOLDFIELDS MARKETS THEREBY AVOIDING SHIPPING RESTRICTIONS ASSOCIATED WITH TICK (BOOPHILUS MICROPLUS), IT WAS LAST USED IN 1958.

After Canning's death a memorial fund was established. Fund activities stuttered along until 1950 when a bust of Canning was unveiled in Perth Public Library. It has since been transferred to the foyer of the Land and Survey Department's office in Cathedral Avenue.

Memorials of this kind are appropriate, but good work is its own monument. Canning's wells still mark a route across Australia's largest uninhabited area.

A more positive tribute to Canning is regularly enacted by members of the Institution of Surveyors in Perth. For the last 40 years the local surveyors have

looked after Canning's grave in the Karrakatta cemetery. The maintenance, usually three times a year, consists of little more than weeding and cleaning. But the conversation over the drinks that follow the working bee ensure that Canning and his work are remembered among surveyors.

One day I'll go to Perth for this function.

My interest in the stock route survives. A cure for insomnia that I have developed keeps my memory of each well quite clear. If I cannot sleep I endeavour to picture in my mind each well along the Canning. I can do it from Wiluna to Halls Creek. However, my mind often wanders to a side issue or a more recent stock route news item, long before I reach Halls Creek.

I have heard that Mr Green, still at Cunyu (just north of Wiluna), now wishes his land did not contain sections of the Canning Stock Route. The continual stream of tourists, explorers, adventurers, four-wheel drive clubs, historians, naturalists, anthropologists, geologists (and others) passing through his paddocks, as they follow the Canning, do not always leave his property as they find it.

The Geraldton Historical Society, in 1974, retraced Forrest's 1874 route to the Overland Telegraph Line. They constructed monuments at Windich Spring (Water 4A) and Weld Spring (Well 9) to commemorate Forrest's, and their own, expeditions.

At Glen-Ayle, Henry Ward and his family required all their pioneering fortitude to survive the drought of the 70's. However, 10 inches of rain in 1982 has given them breathing space - if not security. Henry writes, "I've lost count of the numbers and types of vehicles coming and going on the CSR (Canning Stock Route)." Henry's sons are older and they spend enough time at Glen-Ayle to allow the "old man" to enjoy longer holidays.

Glen-Ayle is still the northernmost property on the southern end of the stock route. But the frontiers are receding. The radphone facility enables telephone subscribers to speak to Henry. He saw Kiwi win the 1983 Melbourne Cup on television, live, at Cunyu with the Greens. Alas, he has also seen fit to remove the ornamental mulga from near his back porch. The lemon trees are still healthy.

I exchange letters with Glen-Ayle each Christmas and each Christmas I marvel at Henry's writing ability. He received minimal formal education, yet in 17 years of correspondence I have never encountered any ambiguity in his letters. His writing flows freely in and out of the colloquial and often transgresses rules of grammar. Spelling errors are not uncommon and punctuation is rare but never have I doubted his meaning. His writing is far from perfect but he communicates faultlessly. (Henry emphasises words by underlining them).

Mrs Ward now talks of her own visit to Durba Hills. In 1981, she and Henry, with other members of their extended family, visited Constance Hedland, Calvert Range and Durba Hills. I hope the trip compensated her for the many years of listening she has endured.

A friend sent me a photograph of the rock face above the water at Durba Spring. It was attributed to "Aboriginal Sites: Western Australian Museum" and has the following caption:

"Ochre paintings, once sacred symbols of the local Aboriginal group, have been destroyed by visitors who cannot resist marking the rock-face with their names and the date of their visits. The site is on the remote Canning Stock Route in Western Australia."

My name is clearly visible, twice - 1967 and 1968. I can see the scratched out third "l" in Noel's surname.

I suffer no guilt. If I were to return to Durba now I would not add my name for a third time. However, if I were to have my time over and find myself at Durba – having made my own tracks to get there and seeing no date later than the 50s and being an anxious young man in my mid-twenties, living in the social climate of the 60s – I am sure I would carve my name on the rock as I did in 1967 and again in 1968.

The unspoiled rock art at Killagurra and on the eastern side of Durba are evidence of aboriginal occupation, just as Canning's cairn on the western edge of the hills is evidence of white man's presence.

Evidence of occupation. A brief tenancy. Evidence of presence - nothing more.

On any time scale man is only a visitor on earth. The aborigines' latest claim to occupancy of the Australian continent is 40,000 years. The age of land is measured in billions of years - not thousands. This land was here billions of years before man. It will outlive man by more billions.

I respect man's ability to destroy himself and damage and, in part, even destroy his environment. However, my travels in Australian deserts has convinced me that they will survive any motions of man. The sandridges will be there long after man is gone.

A recent stock route traveller told me that the track "meanders" between the top of Lake Disappointment and Well 23. "It could be improved," he said.

I was pleased to hear it. In 1967 my first cross-country traverse over a previously untravelled (by motor vehicle) section of the stock route began at Well 23. I tried to drive over my first sandridge in this area. I failed. Rather than risk another failure, I ran the traverse through ridge gaps and sought out clear ground. I avoided sandridge crossings but, as the man said, I meandered. I like to know that many of today's travellers still follow my first tentative tracks into this section of desert.

North of Karara (Well 24) I am told a new track runs north. It is close to the Canning and avoids many high ridges. An enterprising road-house manager near Mt Newman regularly delivers petrol and supplies to stock route travellers near Karara.

Well 26, now restored to its former glory, has become a tourist attraction. On our 1968 trip we were obliged to do an astro-fix to find it.

The well restoration party found Munjingerra: the underground rockhole that Chud, Noel and myself could not find. I was disappointed to hear this. I prefer to hear of wells and rockholes not being found - especially those we found.

Today, between wells 27 and 28, a turn-off to Separation Well is signposted. A plaque, attached to a pipe fixed upright in a drum, proclaims Separation's "discovery" in 1979. Details of where, when and by whom are fully explained. Lawrence Wells and 1896 do not rate a mention.

Worse is to follow. A sandridge near Well 28 has been christened "Transfer Case Hill" to commemorate trouble experienced at this point by a pair of Queensland tourists. If I can rely on Chud's figure of 710 sandridges for the entire stock-route and assume each tourist wishes to claim one to record their journey, the day will come when every sandridge is uniquely identified.

It hurts me to admit it but the coming of four-wheel drive vehicles in the 1960s sounded the death knell of the real Canning Stock Route.

The desert dogger, Peter Muir, dates the end of the Canning with the death of Wally Dowling: the drover who knew it so well. He expressed this opinion and other nostalgic sentiments in the words of his poem *End of the Canning Stock Route*.

Slim Dusty recognised the significance of Peter Muir's work and included it on his album *Things I see Around Me*. Slim has also put music to Wally Dowling poems *Blackened Quarts Are Boiling* and *A Drover's Life*, and included them on his records.

Slim continues to locate authentic Australiana: heroes and villains, workers and bludgers, towns and cities, sheep and cattle stations, sportsmen and women, truckies and trains, cooks and drovers, hotels, roads, creeks, climate, dust, wildlife - his works cover the full spectrum of the Australian way of life. From the poets who first clearly identified the typical Australian (Lawson, Paterson) to those who question it and expose it as a myth (Eric Bogle, Keith Garvey).

I prefer Slim's nostalgic numbers - especially when I'm drinking rum. I drink beer with my workmates, but alone at home, I prefer rum. It reminds me of the cool, clear desert nights. The desert scenes. The desert comforts. Our two-day desert camp at Gunowaggi (Well 33) and the visit of the Yarrie Express.

Bidge and Mrs Welsh toured the eastern states in 1974. They stayed at

a hotel in Sydney and found no joy walking the city streets. They travelled by train to Canberra.

We yarned and drank beer. I showed them the local tourist attractions but they preferred to see my Canning Stock Route slides. They marvelled at the "good feed" (grass) they saw in the paddocks around Canberra. We watched Think Big win his first Melbourne Cup on my television set. Mrs Welsh backed a horse named Corroboree.

Young Langtree now runs Yarrie and Bidge and Mrs Welsh have retired to Marble Bar. Yes, retired to Marble Bar - "The Hottest Town in Australia." It's no retirement village but they luxuriate in the comfort of air-conditioning. Bidge likes to recall the days when we were, as he puts it, "around Yarrie." Chud, Noel and I realise our trip up the stock route would have been hungrier, lonelier and less of a pleasure without the rendezvous with the Yarrie Express at Gunowaggi (Well 33)

Further north Shoemith Cliffs and Thompson Hills are newly named landmarks not far from Libral (Well 37), the Haunted Well.

David Carnegie's book *Spinifex and Sand* is now widely read. In 1973 the Penguin company included it in their "Colonial Facsimile" (paperback) series. It sold well.

In recent years several parties have visited Helena Spring and I suspect it's hard to find a vacant space on the rock face at Godfrey Tank today.

I saw Joe Cocker in concert recently. He sang my favourite desert song *A Whiter Shade of Pale*. Like a true artist, Joe retained enough of the style of the original version while still managing to give it his own personal touch. He sang it well. I sat in Canberra's massive indoor stadium watching Joe's energetic, yet fragile, mannerisms as he expounded the wisdom of the Miller's tale. Despite the surroundings I could detect the distinctive odours of campfire smoke, charcoal stained fingers and an unwashed swag.

I don't camp often these days. I still have my old stretcher but a colourful, compact sleeping bag has replaced my bulky swag. On the stock route my swag consisted of five grey blankets, a thin mattress and a pillow - all wrapped in a large tarpaulin. Bidge commented on the space this bundle occupied in a vehicle. "Married man's swag" he called it. Ah, but it was comfortable.

Often now, in town or country, an object or scene unaccountably releases a spring in my memory and I recall a camp site and the events associated with it. More than anything else connected with the Canning, I treasure the memories of cold nights in my large, but comfortable, swag, under a clear desert sky in a "middle-of-nowhere" camp. I cannot understand people who sleep in a tent (when it is not raining) or who rush on, in the twilight, in order to camp near a homestead.

But there are many things I cannot understand about today's travellers. I am becoming an old-timer: an espouser of the days of my youth and a bore to the youth of today.

I have read many accounts of recent journeys of discovery by amateur historians. I have recognised points in common with my own experiences and, occasionally, I read of discoveries I wish I had made. However, I have never considered any of these expeditions to compare favourably with the one I made up the Canning Stock Route with Chud and Noel in 1968.

Two factors set out trip apart. One: I was on it. Two: we managed without sponsors,

Certainly we received help. Glen-Ayle and Yarrie. The Native Welfare Department. Billiluna. Faul's Land-Rover agency in Perth allowed us to take our own choice of spare parts and only pay for those we did not return. The Commonwealth Surveyor-General of the day granted Chud and myself two months leave without pay.

We each outlaid a good deal of money but the price we paid ensured that the trip belonged to us. It was exclusively ours. It was money well-spent.

I have nothing but admiration for travellers who have sought out and, to varying degrees, prostrated themselves to obtain financial assistance for their expedition. Official farewells, press releases or fund raising functions would not have fitted our style. Once underway, the detours, delays and posing involved with sponsorship or the staging of an event to provide drama would have destroyed the casual, low-key nature of our travels. As Chud says today, "We could never have handled anything like that."

However, I do have some regrets. I did not do enough research before we left. I took only my edition of *The Beckoning West*, copies of pages from *Spinifex and Sand*, several newspaper and magazine articles, a few aerial photographs, Canning's charts and the National Mapping 1:250 000 scale maps of the area with several enlargements at 1:90 000. It was not enough.

In recent years I have discovered mistakes, omissions and incorrect assumptions we made in 1968 that are directly attributable to lack of research.

At Weld Spring (Well 9) the relative positions of blazed trees and the authors' of these blazes has been the subject of more recent research. My simplified understanding of the matter may well be in error.

Canning sank a well in Killagurra gorge (Well 17). In 1968 I thought the spring was the official water and we never looked for a well or its remains.

I have read several descriptions of Separation Well. I find it hard to reconcile these pictures of the scene with my own. Noel reckons Separation Well would be a more substantial well than the one we found.

I have been informed that the large "C" containing the "96" at Godfrey Tank, which I so revered as Carnegie's work, was carved by Canning's man Trotman. Apparently the original "C 96" was smaller and lower down. The

rock containing, it collapsed many years ago.

When I saw Harry Butler's adventures on the Canning on television I realised I paid only scant attention to the flora and fauna of the area. I remember marvelling at the nature and variety of small footprints I saw in the sand, but I never bothered to investigate any. The only animal life we saw was that which encountered us. We sought out nothing. Notes in my diary simply record the presence of galahs, budgerigars, turkeys, a couple of small kangaroos, a tortoise in Windich, a brine shrimp in the Savory Creek, a feral cat near Well 32 and a Thorny Devil - desert dragon, I called it - near Well 36.

I only identified those species of plants and trees mentioned by Canning as being close to a well.

I have never considered going back. A second trip today would be very different.

Travel on the Canning Stock Route has changed since 1968 - and not always for the better,

Diesel fuel and aircraft tyres have simplified the task of desert driving.

Nowadays on the Canning people follow tracks rather than navigate with maps. The Department of the Interior bench marks and the National Mapping beacons and cairns guided parties through, before the track became as clearly defined as it is today. Astro-fixes are rarely used and even they are now simplified. Hand-held calculators have replaced the books of mathematical tables and the series of calculations we used.

Sacred aboriginal sites abound. Travel permits and even aboriginal guides may be required.

According to all reports my favourite well, Dunda Jinnda (Well 30) is silted up, fallen in and dry.

The clearly defined track, with its associated detours, intersections and signposts are proof of the volume of traffic on the route today. Tour operators, with their paying clientele, have arrived. Too many people and too much evidence of people. People going faster or slower, easier or harder, better or worse. Arguing these points with each other as they meet along the way.

And if I did go again I would want to go with Chud and Noel. Not Chud and Noel of today, but Chud and Noel of 1968.

Also, on television, I recently saw the movie *Von Ryan's Express*. The same movie Chud and I had seen at the Wyndham Drive-In – the movie that I so enjoyed. Having waited, expectantly, for a week to watch it and having assured my wife it was a top movie, I was disappointed.

I found the early part of the movie slow and artificial. I felt no tension in the escape sequences. The Germans appeared stupid. I waited for the final scene. When it came the faces of Trevor Howard and Frank Sinatra seemed wooden and expressionless. The entire scene looked staged. It ended quickly.

My wife looked at me quizzically and said, "What was so great about that?"

"Er ... I don't know. I'm not sure. Nothing really, I guess. Gee but I thought it was great when I saw it in Wyndham. It was a lot better then."

Why wasn't it so good now? What had happened? Was the movie only ordinary in the first place? Had my youthful judgement over-rated it? Had the years between destroyed its appeal? Had my imagination magnified it into something more than it really was? Had it dated? Had I dated?

Whatever the reason it was not the same *Von Ryan's Express* I had seen in the drive-in with Chud in 1968. It failed to thrill me. I sat unmoved.

I felt cheated. I had lost a treasured memory.

Best I leave the Canning as it is.

Chud, Noel and myself see each other every two or three years and we enjoy each other's company when we do. And we don't just talk about old times. We are the same men but we are not the same as we were in 1968. Chud and I are married with children. Noel is retired. We are subject to the limitations of man. Time has taken its toll of us. We are human. We go backwards and forwards, losing and gaining with each day. Changing. Ephemeral.

Not so the desert. It is still the same. Maybe the scar of the Canning Stock Route is a little more pronounced but when the desert is viewed in its entirety the scar shrinks to insignificance.

Nightly, on my television, I watch the weather patterns in the west. Throughout summer I look for cyclones crossing the Pilbara, developing into "lows" as they reach the desert and sometimes "dumping" life-giving water on the sandridge country.

It is an ancient pattern of weather. The concentric circles representing isobars, with an "L" at their centre, fit neatly within the confines of a television screen. But I try and visualise what the symbols represent. An enormous mass of dark cloud, smothering the ironstone hills and sweeping across into the desert void, obliterating many latitudes of land - including the faint thread of the Canning Stock Route.

To get the true scale of this ionospheric phenomenon I occasionally walk outside and look up at the sky. The same limitless sky that covers the desert. But it's too much. Too big to comprehend or imagine. Like infinity or eternity. I recall how its size and timelessness overawed me in 1968. I retreat back into the house. A world with limits. Finite.

I say to my wife, "It'd be a good year to drive the stock route" or "Looks like Henry's in for some rain."

She smiles patiently.

NOTES ON REFERENCES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Some books, with no apparent connection to the Canning Stock Route, are listed in my bibliography. These books are ones that influenced me on the Canning trip or influenced me as I wrote this account of the trip.

Over the years I have accumulated a suitcase full of articles about explorers and the Canning Stock Route. Some have been loaned and exposed to the desert air, others are photocopies of photocopies and many do not contain any reference to the publication from which they came. Consequently, I cannot prepare an accurate list of references for sources of this kind. (The articles I have listed, I found the most useful.)

I must acknowledge the article *Wanderings of a Desert Dogger*, published in *The Territorian* of September 1966. Although the writer of this article is not named on my copy, I believe it to have been Peter Muir.

David Hewitt's booklet, *A Brief History of the Canning Stock Route* - prepared for Canning Stock Route Aerial Tours, 350 Shepperton Road, East Victoria Park, W.A. 6101 in 1979 - contains more accurate information on the Canning Stock Route than any other single source.

I have not recorded the correspondence and conversations have shared with many persons with knowledge of the Canning Stock Route. The most prominent sources of this kind were:

Henry Ward - of Glen-Ayle

Frank Welsh - Yarrie and Marble Bar

Dr Peasley - author of *The Last of the Nomads*

Eleanor Smith - author of *The Beckoning West*

Barry Cribb - Warden, A.W. Canning Grave,

Institution of Surveyors, W.A. Division

David Hewitt

David Chudleigh and Noel Kealley

Heather Maxwell typed the original manuscript

Keith Jameson prepared the maps

Division of National Mapping (NATMAP) 1:250,000 maps covering the
Canning Stock Route

Wiluna, Nabberu, Stanley, Trainor, Gunanya, Runton, Tabletop, Ural,
Percival, Helena, Dommer, Cornish, Mt Bannerman, Billiluna, Gordon Downs

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