

**THE
MEANDERING
THOUGHTS
OF A
NOMADIC KIND**

Book One

**A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES OF MY TRIP AROUND AUSTRALIA
1997-2001**



Peter C Byrnes

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To the memory
Of
My Father
George Alfred Charles Byrnes
(1920-2003)

It was surprisingly his enjoyment in reading these short stories of my travels
that spurred me to continue with the practise whilst I was travelling

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FRONT PAGE

An incredible bush camping site called Quondong Point approx. 60 kilometres north of Broome WA. Those colours are a true representation of the red of the earth, the white of the sand and the aquamarine clear waters. The water warm and you never went without a fish meal!

PROLOGUE

Similar to many Australians, I held the dream to one day wend my way around this great land. The dream not rooted in reality as the 'how and when' were never fathomed.

I was lucky to be given the chance to take retirement around 50 years of age with sufficient funds and still of reasonable health to at last turn my dream into the reality that I had cherished for so long. I purchased a 4WD and an 'Off-road' Pop-top van in 1996. At that time the 'Off-Road' Caravan market was in its infancy and many accessories now considered the norm in to-days market had not even been considered back then.....or were extremely expensive and/or unreliable.

Many compromises or doing without were the consequences during my travels because of this fact.

My intended route:- The open road

My intended itinerary:- The open road

My intended time-frame:- Open-ended.

Family and friends demanded that I remain in touch at least once a week by phone, mail, postcard and/or a swathe of photographs which I vehemently rejected as the practise would take most of my time, my money and nigh on impossible in a lot of the areas of my projected travel. I eventually relented to the constant nagging of all tethered to suburbia and sent off my first letter some 9 months into my sojourn. This epistle ended up being around 19 hand-written pages long such is my verbosity. It didn't take me long to realise that this practise could not continue with all and sundry included as time-scale and practical considerations would not allow this habit. The content of the letter was such that I could edit out certain unsuitable passages and language that may have been acceptable to mates but not to family and thus communications apart from the occasional phone call could begin anew.

Thus the Short Story was borne and much to my amazement thoroughly enjoyed, especially by my father. His enthusiasm and the constant requests from others for more of the same ensured that I continued. It began with I think 3 copies being sent east and by the time that I had to curtail my travels in mid 2001 there were about 17 copies being sent off east.

While the content varies from the facts in some anecdotes, others are embellished either slightly or a lot with some being pure figments of my imagination. I hope that the reader can distinguish the difference!

Around half the enclosed Stories were written while I was on the road. During all my travels I religiously kept a Trip Journal. Because of bad health in 2008 and having learnt the magic of computers, Photoshop and digitising 35mm photographs, I was able to begin the task of transcribing the Journal inserting the relevant photos into the passages. The whole process taking some 3 years! This prompted another flurry of Short Stories which have been included within this 3 Volume set.

Any error, incorrect statement, straight out bending of the truth or stupid act is purely my doing. My responsibility. My mistake.

I deleted close on 1000 photographs and captions from the following stories in order to condense the size of the book. Rather sad about that fact as I was not only proud of some of the photos that I took as I crawled about, but they added interest, professionalism and polish to each of the stories.....or so I believe. They also added something like a Gig to the overall size of this Volume!

I can only hope that there are some who enjoy the reading as much as I enjoyed the experience and the recording of them.

Regards

Peter C Byrnes
2013

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A SUPPLY STOP

I pulled up. The ‘cocky’s comb’ of dust catching up with me.

He was seated on the first tread of the steps that led up to the wide shaded veranda; timber railed and tree trunk posted which surrounded the low galvanised iron General Store, Post Office, Service Station and Grog Shop.

The only shop in town. The only substantial building apart from the Cop Shop, the Bank, the Pub and the local SES building.

Elbows rested on his knees, head lolled gently, swaying side to side. A tightly curled close-cropped mat of grey-white hair covered his head. A tattered red T-shirt hung off his skinny frame, his shoulders hunched. The lighter shade of the soles of his feet hidden by layers of dirt. Large toes, one blackened darker than his skin with the toenail missing. Long bony, sinewy hands. A half smoked dead ‘rollie’ squeezed between two nicotine stained fingers. He looked up, straightening one arm, the hand still on his knee as though bracing the rest of his upper body.

He looked at me quizzically through rheumy, blood-shot, cloudy eyes.

“Yuh godda ‘moke brudda?” Husky, strained voice.

“No...I don’t smoke.”

He reverted back to his original position as though he’d grown there. A resigned ‘Harrumph’, his only response.

On the next step up a frail old woman sat, matchstick legs splayed around the old man seated in front of her. Large dirty feet seemed to exaggerate the thinness of her legs and the bony protuberances of her knees and ankles. A tattered dirty, flowered dress several sizes too large for her had ridden up to her thighs and hung askew from her shoulders. Her hair was matted, sticking up piece-meal in dirty, projecting strands like a Golliwog’s looking as though it had never been washed or at best, only washed in the hard water of an Artesian Bore; taking the life out of it. She looked past me; through me with eyes similar to the old man’s.

“Yuh godda drink?” She pleaded in a dry, croaky voice.

“Thanks, but no thanks....it’s too early for me!” I patronisingly replied.

“Nudda smar’arse whitey.” The old man slurred and murmured.

The old crone cackled in a high pitched wheeze. Dry coughed.

A half smoked, dead ‘rollie’ behind each ear. The ‘Supply Wagon’ for the old man.....or for her own use, I supposed. The old man ‘harrumphed’ again and with an arthritic shrug of his shoulders attempted to put the dead ‘rollie’ that he held in his hand unsuccessfully into his mouth. Instead of again trying to raise his arm, he hunched his back and shoulders and craned his head awkwardly to greet the durry.

It hung limply from his lips unlit, disjointed and bent.

I climbed the last step to the veranda and looked along its length into the gloom.

There were more bodies lounged against the wall and leaning on the veranda posts. Unwashed, unkempt hair, St. Vinnies reject rags, legs splayed or bent. Cigarette smoke hung in the still air. Thin legs and dirty feet intertwined forming an impassable barrier. A small chubby cheeked baby, rotund, dark sparkling eyes, coffee coloured skin, tight rust coloured locks sat in the middle of the mass of legs. Little hands raised, fists clenched, snotty nose coagulating, crusted on its upper lip. Flies nibbled at the corners of his eyes and the crusting of his lip, a grimy disposable nappy his loincloth; his only clothing.

“Do you mind if I get through?” I raised my voice only slightly hoping that I did not sound confrontational or demanding.

A slithering of long spindly legs as they all bought their knees up to their chests. No one stood. No one swivelled out of the way. The baby sat there looking about bewildered, wondering what the sudden movement was all about. I carefully negotiated the half-cleared path still having to pick my way over some legs stubbornly left as they were. Gingerly stepping around the baby clucking my tongue. I got a beaming smile from around a dirty fist now thrust into his mouth as a response to my attention.

Some one in the mangle of bodies yelled.

“Hey brudda...yuh godda dolla?”

I addressed the crowd as one. “No....sorry. I’ve only got enough for Supplies. I don’t carry any spare cash...I use EFTPOS” Jabbing my finger in the direction of the Store’s entry door. As though this explained that I intended to buy out the Shop with what little money I carried if they didn’t take ‘card’.

“Harrumph!” Some one uttered just like the old man.

“Anudda smar’ mouff from da south!”

This bought an hysterical wave of cackles, wails and whoops from the assembled loungers and a repetition of the ‘line’ caused more uproar.

Then they settled back into their air of ambivalence and enforced lassitude as though they had nothing to do and all the time to do it. Waiting in ambush for another Southerner to come by to use the ‘line’ again. I made for the aluminium, clear glass Entry Door into the shop pulling it ajar to be confronted by a trail of billowing, multi-coloured plastic insect extrusion strips. As though it was expected that the local insects would force an entry through the glass door but some-how be repelled by the tentacles of plastic.

A large boned, big-framed monster of a man appeared out of the inside gloom of the shop.

I held the door open for him.

He stepped through the opening nodding his acknowledgement at my courtesy. Limp coloured streamers hung around him as if in a forlorn attempt to thwart his escape from the dimly lit interior. A big man. Big features. Big hat. Dark menacing eyes almost glowed in the blue-black shiny features of his face. A large nose spread across his face melting into globular cheeks. Fat, thick lips. A swollen forehead almost swallowed his deep-set eyes. A large brimmed hat enhanced the

menacing shadows of his face. A washed out western shirt stretched across the paunch of his stomach with the sleeves rolled down, unbuttoned at the wrist. It was unlikely that the cuffs had ever been fastened. Giant slabs of hands, thick fingers. Once heavily muscled arms now hung loosely. Clean washed jeans were held up by a wide black belt that had a silver steer-head buckle straining to control the avalanche of stomach bearing over it. Riding boots of a size large enough for a Bull Elephant. Dirt stained. Cracked and dry. Cuban heeled as if he thought he needed the extra height.

He looked at me, through me. He nodded, touching the brim of his hat with a large erect thumb.

You could misinterpret the gesture as one obscene!

I stepped across the threshold attempting to untangle myself from the clawing of a multitude of hanging plastic ribbon. Corraling those errant strips that doggedly continued to flap lethargically outside the door and shoved them quickly inside before I stepped through the threshold. I let the door close on its automatic arm with a 'thwack'.

The interior was dimly lit. At least half the 'fluoro-tubes' were blown. An Air-conditioning unit thrummed away complaining to no one its need for a long over-due overhaul. But at least it continued to do its job. With effort so it seemed. It was decidedly cooler in here than outside with the oppressive heat rebounding off the road. There was a mishmash of counter styles that ran parallel to the sidewall away from the Entry door, returning at right angles along the back. There was more than sufficient room behind for the serving staff. The counters possibly gleaned from liquidation and closing down sales and rejects that had been tossed out; no longer wanted. The dregs from broken dreams. I thought that a 'southern' Antique Dealer would be in second heaven as I appraised them and some of the antiquated equipment lying about. Some bright chrome clean, clear glass display cabinets. Others just brass, the chrome rubbed off long ago. Glass frosted and scratched by years of usage. Timber fronted sections heavily panelled with wide thick timber tops possibly flinched from a long lost pub rubbed ends with the slimline chrome and glass units. Old black phones with party line rotors, wall hung models with protruding voice funnels and single earpieces attached to the bodies competed with each other and more modern examples for space on the back wall. Several finely scrolled and etched Cash Registers stood high and bulky; a patina evident over the once chromed scrollwork on their sides. Large old lolly bottles. A display of beer bottles, spirit bottles and cans, drink coasters pinned above them along the wall all rescued from some derelict pub. Shelves of bric-a-brac, an assortment of haberdashery, sewing needs, laces, spools of satin ribbon, shoe and old fashion hat boxes, knives, cardboard boxes of ammunition, shotgun cartridges, billies, enamelware, cheap plastic toys seeming to be jumbled together in these old glass display cases. Others displayed sweets, chocolates and other foods of questionable dietary value. The sidewall was covered with continuous timber shelving stacked from the floor almost to the ceiling with all kinds of packeted foods. To one side of the front door, the largest display unit outside a Sydney supermarket bulged with a myriad cigarette brands hung on the wall behind the counter. The counter was topped with a compact electric cash register festooned with wires, cables and electric cords that connected an array of 'card readers', fax and squat phone unit heralding in the electronic age. A four door, cold drink refrigerator loomed opposite against the wall on the other side of the door, two large glass topped freezers squatted beside it. An old, original-looking timber sliding door indicated a cool room or 'walk-in freezer' in the rear corner.

The floor was clean, covered in cheap terra-cotta coloured tiles. Enough area existed on the 'customers' side' to accommodate self-standing open shelving but there was none, leaving an area vacant as big as a 'ballroom'. The 'server' sequestered behind the counters safe.

At the counter was a tall, spindly Aborigine, a large hat raked back on his head, his back to me. He

was being served by a woman in her late thirties, I guessed. Nervous, resentful eyes with a closed expression to her face.

She could be pretty if she smiled, I thought to myself.

As I went to shut the Cold Drink Cabinet after extracting a 2-litre container of milk and a large bottle of Coke, the Aborigine sauntered bow-legged over to me. As tall as the giant outside. As dark as him. Fine features, smooth almost baby skin with a sheen to it. Piercing eyes, a nose flattened across his face. Lanky. Wide shoulders, narrow hips. A clean sky-blue western shirt hugging his chest accentuated a flat stomach. The colour of it contrasted beautifully with the dark pigmentation of his skin. Sleeves rolled to his elbows. Wiry arms, long thin hands with almost feminine fingers. Jeans clean but bleached, tight over his hips, held up by a shiny black belt. A large steer-head buckle glinted in the gloom. Cuban-heeled riding boots dusty and well worn. His hat could've shaded him and his horse and was cocked rakishly off his brow.

I caught the door before it sealed, opening it up again for him. He thrust a long slender arm in to extract four cans of Coke in one hand with a flourish, a confident flair. He turned to me, "Thanks mate". A soft educated voice...by comparison....a quick easy smile that lit up his face, his eyes open and honest. He touched the brim of his hat. "You have a good one." Looking straight in to my eyes. He proffered the four cans to the woman as proof of his honesty and sauntered to the door.

I approached the counter.

She was looking after the lad, her face hard, a suspicious, resentful look in her eyes. Almost hateful. The door slammed shut. She glanced at me almost embarrassingly when she realised that I was reading the expression on her face. She managed a silly grin, looked away, and patted the tight bun of hair on the back of her head. I guessed she had long silken tresses that flowed over her shoulders when set free. She patted her hips.

"Well....?" She said.

A broad smile began to grow across her face, the frostiness melted, her face warmed, and a sparkle in her eyes ignited.

"And what can I do for you on this fine day? From down south I reckon....just passing through? Every-one does.....no use stopping here, 'cept for supplies and fuel....do you need to fill up? Next fuel's down the road 'bout 200 kays....just the milk and drink then?....the bowser's 'round the side....just take the nozzle off, just like the city....progress has been here you know, stopped awhile then left...couldn't be bothered with us. Sorry t' have kept you waiting....."

Laughing at her own joke she nodded her head to the outside 'riff raff'.

The gambit more than likely said to every new face that came into the shop. As long as it wasn't black I thought, recalling the stony face offered to the young lad served before me. I held a sheet of paper to my eyes straining to read in the dimness. My list of required supplies scrawled in 'shorthand' that only I could decipher, or so I thought.

She tittered.

"That's subtle!"

A warm soft voice breaking through, laughter bubbled.

"I guess it's a bit dull in here, but some-how it seems cooler for it....you know what I mean? Some say so's they can't read the prices or the change I give 'em...until they're outside and then it's too late!" She bubbled a girlish giggle looking vaguely at the blown tubes then took the paper from my hands to quickly scan it.

"Me Dad...him and mum ran this shop from Day One...before he died was confined to a wheelchair...couldn't do much...I suspect he was frustrated by not being able to help any more in the shop. He used to sit over there near the Cool Room door...reckoned it was cooler there; the coolest place in the shop apart from inside the Cooler....Dad's Corner....he'd sit for hours staring at those blown globes....reckoned 'Idleness made light work'..."

She shook her head sadly at the memories.

"Butter...how much? Or do you want Margarine?....salt free?...cholesterol free?....1kg or a 500 tub?"

And so on down the list questioning each item until she knew exactly what I wanted. My shorthand scrawl didn't seem to faze her at all. I smiled to myself. Satisfied on the details of the list, she began pottering around the shop tip-toeing, bending, showing me nice buns and legs poking through a butt-hugging pair of 'Country Road' multi-pocketed shorts and a cleavage down a loose buttoned blouse of thin, 'see-through' material that showed glimpses of a lacy, half-cup bra. She caught me several times appreciating the 'peek' show, taking heart almost, that I was 'perving'. She chatted ten to the dozen....flirted with her eyes, her body and her banter. It wasn't my brilliant repartee or quick wit that kept the flow going. She was like a run-a-way train; unstoppable; a compulsive trivia expert personified.

"Do you want to drop the nozzle?" She asked cheekily.

"No thanks...I'm right."

I ignored the double meaning, the flirt. I had enough petrol to get me to the next big 'town' where I'd been told previously it was 7 cents a litre cheaper than here.

"Just as well....fighting your way through that lot again...lazy buggers. Southerners get a shock when they're confronted with that lot as they try to get through to the front door....having to put up with their begging demands....don't give the buggers anything!" She said vehemently. "Townies...town blacks...they're no good....just lounge about getting drunk....swearing. Mind you, they've got twice as much money as you and I put together....but they just piss it up the wall...or leave it in the bank....don't know what to do with it! They could buy a nice 4WD and caravan and travel, like you....and we'd be rid of them...become some-one else's problem, but no....they just lie around here doing nothing...making a bloody nuisance of themselves!"

She looked up at me with something akin to guilt etched on her face.

"Don't get me wrong....I'm not a racist...the station Blacks are good buggers...I went to school with most of them....they're hard workers....good stockmen....they're out there, not here!.... only come to town for supplies....that suits me fine! I mean that young bloke just here...always clean, civil....they say he don't drink at all, just like his Dad...the big bloke out there....but all blacks, sorry....indigenous people....that's a laugh...they all drink. I mean....JW....the big bloke out there...he was as skinny as his son once....don't tell me it's just middle-age spread...it's grog....and sittin' 'round doing nothin'".

Sarcasm in her voice.

“JW out there, he was a ‘star’ Rodeo-man in the ‘Territory’....‘champeen’ when he was younger...could have been anything...like his son could...both could have gone south and been famous footballers.....even basketballers...look at the size of ‘em!”

She began ticking off the growing pile against my list packing them neatly into a cardboard box that she had retrieved from the rear of the shop. Her words just uttered re-inforced the impression I had from the initial look of suspicion emblazoned on her face as she had watched the young bloke leave her store, was that she was a blazing racist! But what the heck, she did live amongst them! I, being a ‘Southerner’, would never fully understand the intricacies of the problems involved. The day to day involvement. She startled me from my musings.

“I mean...JW gave it all away...some say he had a couple of bad falls and hurt himself bad...me, I reckon he missed the family and the drinkin’...easier to do nothin’ than the Rodeo circuit. I mean, him and his son manage the ‘Downs’...the biggest paddock in these parts....3000 square miles would you believe, bigger’n some countries in Europe so I’m told. The young bloke went to some fancy Agricultural College down south paid for by the Owner and his Missus....did well so they say which surprised me....his Old Man couldn’t spell his name before he left school and I should know, he went to the same school as I did! The young bloke is now doing a Business Course by correspondence so I’m told...getting’ a bit above himself don’t you think?”

She looked at me quizzically as she poured me another cup of coffee. You could tell that she was warming to the subject. I was starting to think how the hell do I get out of this! I had to bite my tongue on several occasions. Steeling myself by taking quick glances at her body as she scampered about, bending over to get something or climbing up on a small stepladder and standing on tiptoes in order to reach something. Putting an occasional packet of something that I presumed I’d ordered into the cardboard box which had started to overflow. I was even starting to feel sorry for her. It was obvious that she seldom had the chance to run off so much at the mouth to such a blatantly sympathetic ear!

Especially when you saw the colour of those close by!

“They say them two run the whole show...the biggest spread around these parts! With Bill’s, that’s the Owner....Missus....all by themselves....fly planes, ‘copters, ride horses and bikes on muster....do all the computer work....books...everything! Well, you know, you’d never know if you’d been got at would you?”

She glanced at me with a surprised look on her face, wanting me too, to feel alarmed.

“I mean Bill, the Owner...he’s never there. They say he’s always gallivanting around...has a kept woman in every capital city in Australia and more some, so they say....”

Lowering her voice to a more conspiratorial level.

“But I don’t take much stock in rumours, you know what I mean? I mean...he’s such a nice bloke...but still...you can’t tie a good man down, can you? If the rumours are true. I mean, JW and his son will come into town once a fortnight...you never see Bill’s missus, they may have killed her for all I know....for Supplies....I’ve got the list here, it’ll take me all day to pack it, fill their truck...but all they do while they’re waiting, is sit out there smoking, talking, drinking Coke...bet it’s laced with something...talking to that family...”

She went and exchanged something or other but it wouldn’t fit into the box. She took everything

out and disappeared to emerge with a larger box.

“I won’t get the cold and frozen stuff until you’re ready to go.”

Topping up my coffee as if I was sweating on it. I knew one thing for sure...that I’d be stopping every couple of miles for a wee and I’d possibly have problems getting to sleep that night caused by a caffeine overdose! She needed to talk apparently, to spread those spurious rumours or to enjoy sharing the intimate details; to openly flirt. So did I for that matter, the flirting I mean...but I didn’t encourage it though...!

“I mean...we had a series of break-ins here a couple of years ago. Cleaned out the smokes, some beer, bitta loose change...not much damage...broke a door and a window though. I gotta alarm system put in straight after.”

She poured herself another cup of coffee and offered me a ‘top up’. I declined with a shake of my head.

“The cops caught a couple of young blokes who’d just started jobs on a property close to town. Supposed to have been lazy buggers.....I’d say just the age they were. Nice boys really....whites. Anyway, the cops charged them but they were left off, fined though...what do you call it?...on good behaviour...they were always well behaved around here when they came in....quiet, respectful.”

A wail of laughter and whoops came from the “Loungers” outside.

“Not like them!” She nodded her head in that direction. “I reckon that it was the ‘Townies’.....them!” With a jab of her finger. “Outsmarted the cops....left incriminatin’ evidence around those young boys’ quarters...wouldn’t surprise me. It’d be just like them!”

She lifted the cardboard box to test its weight. It must have passed for she ducked into the Cool Room to bring out some frozen goods and a slab of beer, the last of it!

“I mean, you saw them...you had to walk over them to get in here...as though they own the joint....wouldn’t get out of their own way if their own sweet life itself depended on it! Jeez, I’ve called the cops so many times over the years to shoo them away. Half an hour later they’d be back again! Cops gave up...I’d call them up and they’d say they were too busy right now....in this burg?....would get to it when they were free...they never would!”

The hard look was again starting to creep across her face.

“I’d try...I’d ask them to piss off offa the veranda, they’d just laugh and swear at me...sit back down as soon as I came back inside....some days I feel like a prisoner in here....I mean, I went to school with a lot of them...and you know what?.... the laughable thing is...I got into trouble with the cops!”

She looked aghast. A hurt look crept across her face.

“They told the cops one time that it was the coolest place in town....’cept for the Cooler in here!....wouldn’t let them in there! They said that they always ensured that they kept the veranda clean, it seemed to always catch the breeze and they could watch the traffic go by....never got drunk Boss!....no beer boddles or smoke packs tost bout Boss!....not like their bloody camp which isn’t fit to live in....Cool! I gave them cool! I turned the hose on ‘em! I gave them cool and a bath to boot!” Her voice raised to an indignant level. “And the cops threatened to jail me for assault!”

She paused, waiting for my indignation to surface in sympathy with her.

“They should book them...the lot of ‘em. Put the lot in jail, they could all sit around in there...cool...out of sight, out of mind and out of my bloody hair and every-ones’ way!”

By this stage I was pressing the secret jargon into the EFTPOS machine. After the show of intimacy of the last half-hour or so, I thought better of voicing my opinion and kept my counsel. I could imagine the vehemence released if I was to utter, ‘book ‘em? Chuck ‘em in jail? What for? On what charge? Just to get them out of sight?’ I’m sure a look of betrayal would surface followed by anger. ‘What are ya? Some sort of Do-Gooder, liberal Greenie from down south? You don’t live here and have no idea....you don’t know them good-for-nothing layabout black, drunk bastards! Get out of here you Pinkie-Greenie! You soft Liberal!’ I could almost hear those words spewing out of her mouth!

I’d seen such a reaction before; admittedly in different circumstances...A uranium mine project, a logging camp, a remote fishing paradise village on the shores of the Gulf of Carpentaria, a political discussion in Queensland...but they’re different stories!

I took the proffered receipt, raised my eyebrows in token sympathy to her problems, and picked up the cardboard box, the frozen goods on top with the slab of beer underneath. I tottered towards the door thanking her profusely for her time, the chat and the copious amounts of coffee and wished her a thousand ‘Good lucks’ for the future.

I staggered under the load not wanting to negotiate the minefield of legs and feet more than once.

The door was opened for me.

The ‘giant’ swept up the load in one arm, carrying it to the van to place it gently on the A-frame. He tipped the brim of his hat with an erect thumb and sauntered back to the throng under the veranda. All before I could thank him or engage him in any form of conversation.

I opened the van door, turned and caught his eye, which appeared to be the only glint of light or white in the gloom of the shaded veranda. I nodded my thanks, giving a ‘thumbs up’ for good luck. He grinned a beacon of light as his white teeth flashed.

I transferred the goods into the van packing them away for safety. A head bobbed around the door. Rust coloured tight curls, coffee coloured skin, an innocent young face, a wide toothy grin. A skinny frame, arms and legs. A pair of dirty silk boxer shorts hung from below his hips, the elastic almost at his crutch. He was about 10 years old I guessed.

“Hey missa, ya need a han’? I can ‘elp yuh, won’t cost yuh nuttin’”.

Another face appeared. Blacker. More sullen eyes as though his life’s experiences at still such a tender age had toughened him. A beret pulled tight over his head with the band almost to the line of his eyebrows and ears. More sulky looking. Taller. A baggy basketball vest and a still baggier pair of silk shorts, number 31 emblazoned in red on the dirty blue of the shorts. Bare dirty feet.

“No thanks mate, she’s almost done but thanks all the same though, anyway.”

Whether it was or it wasn’t, didn’t seem to be the question. Thinking about it later, it was more the case that I didn’t want the dirty little buggers invading my domain. You wouldn’t know what they’d

knock off!

“Jeez...! Yuh even godda mica-wave!” He said, big eyed in astonishment.

“Hey!” Turning to the tribe on the veranda, “He’s even godda mica-wave AND a dubbel bed ‘n here!” Turning to me, “Yuh godda TV too? Yuh godda CD player oder dare!”

Fearing an invasion of kids or the whole tribe in fact, and thinking in the back of my mind that the van would be ransacked if I didn’t get the hell out of there, I looked hurriedly around, satisfied for the moment of its travel worthiness. I shoo-ed the kids out of the doorway, stepped down and began closing the door. Never for one minute appreciative of the little kid’s total innocent wonderment. Instead I looked towards the veranda relieved that none of the family had roused from their positions. The young kid bounced a tennis ball. He looked up at me in awe.

“Wow missa!...yuh godda cool ou’fit...Jeez...betcha that costa wad?”

‘Beret Top’ had a scowl on his face. Resentful that he was not given the option of a good eye full perhaps. He stood to one side, hands on his hips with his head cocked at an arrogant angle threateningly. Standing no taller than to my chest.

“Wotsa madda honky? We ain’t goo’nuff t’look atcha carro-van?”

Mimicking the ‘punk’ stance and idiom of the black Ghetto kids of America.

“Wotsa madda...we no’ goo’nuff whitey?”

Accusing. Challenging.

We no’ goo’nuff....yo nuttin’ bu’ a honky...a racist...a smar’arse mouth frum d’ sowf!”

Bum out, arms flapping, he strutted around in circles. Chanting, repeating the words in rough tempo. The young bare-chested kid looked at his companion first in horror then bewilderment. He glanced at the veranda then back again, twirling the tennis ball nervously in his hands. Just then a raucous laugh erupted from the veranda followed by more laughter and whooping. A slow handclap in time with the ‘strut’. A ‘way t’ go bro’ shouted from the bleachers. I doubted that they would be able to hear the smart-arse language and were just enjoying “ma man doin’d ’strut”.

The little kid with the ball again squinted in the direction of the appreciative throng now ‘jiving’ along, then back to ‘Chicken Dancer’. A slow smile eventually found his face. He jumped up and down in an uncoordinated attempt to copy the ‘strut’ perhaps forgetting the words still being chanted by the punk which was now inaudible over the claps and wails, the cheers of encouragement.

I locked the van door, climbed into the truck and started up. A light smack of a tiny black hand on the metal skin of the door my only farewell for the road ahead. I turned to the open road, thinking, feeling sorrow, empty, guilty.

God help reconciliation when at the ‘coal face’, we are all guilty of preconceived prejudices, bigotry by sight and straight out racism. The chasm seemed pretty wide and deep and not looking as though it would ever be breached for the next generation...or the one after that...or the one after that!

pcb© 11/5/99

A CONVERSATION IN BORROLOOLA

I sat on the bank of the river just down from the boat ramp; at the highest point of the bank above the waterline available to me watching various species of birds keeping the insect swarms at manageable levels. Swooping agilely over the choppy waters. Chasing some unseen morsel....at least by human eyes! I'd gone to fish from a ford over the river some miles out of town which was a favourite spot of the locals, so I had been informed, but numerous mud slides and several 'blobs' in the water perturbed me. I couldn't tell if they were logs, twigs or a leaf even! But they reminded me of crocs' eyes. I was alone with no-one else around.

It worried me.

So I decided to come back to the town boat ramp where I was told good fish were caught and the constant human activity tended to deter the crocs. I parked the truck haphazardly in the 'trailer turning circle'. No one was around. A couple of 'tinnies' were tied off to nearby trees. I walked over to the water's edge; a flurry of splashes and a glint of movement in the shallow water near a drop-off deterred me. I don't know whether it was a croc, freshwater or otherwise, a fish, an eel, or what?

But it deterred me.

That was why I was sitting on the highest section of the bank about 2 metres up above the waterline. I had been there for about ¾ hour watching the birds, spotting a Brahminy Kite with its pure white head, neck and breast perched in a large dead tree on the opposite bank. Wondering whether I was far enough up away from the water's edge, keeping a nervous lookout for crocs up and down the river.

Paranoid.

There was movement behind me. With my lack of hearing and directional hearing failings, I could be in the water thrashing about in a death roll before I knew what hit me!

"G'day Missa."

I turned and looked up. A tall, knobbly-kneed black stood behind me. Big feet. Dirty feet. Bulbous toes. Two mates sat against the trunk of a tree in the centre of the 'turning circle'. Another was lying down on the bank, a 45-degree slope affording a view of the river without him having to lift his head. Another was climbing into one of the 'tinnies' moored near the boat ramp. High sided, large motor. A name indistinguishable, faded, on the side of the boat. About a 12-14 footer. The chap behind me started mumbling presumably to me. Presumably in English!

"Sorry?....."

I flicked my ear trying to indicate, to give him some indication that I could not hear too well. More mumbles. I stood up and walked towards him explaining that I was partially deaf.

"How you going," I asked, trying to be sociable and hoping to not give the impression that I was in any way a racist. After all, there were more of them than me. Discretion is the better path than plain stupidity! A nod of the head and a look away. Dirty clothes but of the fashionable two sizes too large basketball gear. Eyes as black as coals, dark as dark skin. Short curly hair. A baseball cap pulled back so that the brim was almost vertical, a trick in itself as I thought it should have fallen

off the back of his head! Hardly any whites in his eyes. What there was, was extremely blood-shot. A swollen, puffy looking face.

“Yuh ‘moke?”

Brilliant observational skills.

I took another puff. Gave him the pack as I knew there was only three left. His mates ran over except for the one in the boat, all giggling like schoolgirls.

“Yuh fiss....for fiss?”

Another pearl.

I lit the smoke now dangling from his thick lips. He could do the honours for the others, but they didn't take a cigarette from him.

“Nah...saw a couple of crocs! They scare the shit out of me!” Trying to impress him by being flippant. His expression didn't change. He looked away almost apologetically, turning his head away from me in an almost meek gesture. I was thinking halitosis on my part. I wondered what he'd make of that word.

“Crocs....yeah!”

Glancing momentarily at me, head askew, me wanting to cover my mouth and ask him if I could borrow his toothbrush. That would have put him in a spin. He pinched the end of the smoke; exactly half its length was still 'smokable'. He saw me watching, my pack of smokes still cupped in the palm of one of his hands.

“Fur me gin.” He said meekly looking away.

He held out his arm. A skinny figure stood up by the tree maybe 6 metres away. Ran over, a toothy smile flashed across its face. You couldn't tell what sex it was. Took the half-dead smoke from his outstretched hand and stuck it behind an ear....presumably his gin.

The cigarette for later. For him? For her?

She had skinny dirty legs, feet again too big for her frame. The same over-sized basketball shorts and vests that they all wore. A dirty red beret looking too small shoved tightly over her scalp. The beret was fringed in short, greasy black, tight curls. Almost elfin features splattered by a broad nose. Clear eyes that I only got a glimpse of as her head was bowed, her eyes downcast as she approached. She had a youthful spring to her step. When she took the offered smoke and placed it firmly for stowage she glanced at me. The most exquisite smile. Not large 'lubra' lips but finely formed. A lovely mouth, a finely chiselled face. A long, slim neck. Her body was waif thin or thinner actually from what I could determine through the bagginess of her 'in' clothes. My height or maybe even a little taller. Age indeterminate. Funny thing was, what I noticed during the whole time from when he pinched the end of the cigarette to her putting it behind her ear, they never exchanged glances. He looked down but straight ahead. Not at me, nor at her, he just held his arm out with the dead smoke in his fingers to summon her. Action...the Master has called!

They must be doing something right!

I remembered reading somewhere that an Aboriginal considers it disrespectful to look another

person in the eye.

Without a change of expression or any voice modulation and at the same time as all the above was occurring, he mumbled, "Crocs...no problems." He pointed out into the river with his other hand, the pack of smokes still cupped firmly in his palm. A snout was evident. He jabbered more boisterously in Abspeak. Giggles all around. A swollen faced mate jumped up from his seated position at the tree, now again shared with the Gin, and ran to the bank and into the water up to his knees. Giggling.

"Yuh ride?" Jabbing his head towards my truck.

The guy in the water started splashing about.

"Yeah."

"Nice ride? Cool ride. Where yuh frum?"

"Sydney."

"Oh!...big 'moke?"

Turning his head towards me but not looking at me.

"Yeh. You live around here?"

"Godt anudda 'moke?"

He still had my packet clutched in his hand. I'd finished the one that I had been puffing on and had flicked it into the water. I did not know if he was offering me one of my 'own' or whether he wanted to know if I had another full pack. I took the safe way out, nodding my head in negation to the question. The conversational bits and pieces were heavily bracketed by pregnant pauses seemingly almost nine months in the gestation period, accompanied by sweeping scans of the river; by both of us.

"I lib up ribba... 'bout ten mile....our place."

"What are you doing in town? That your boat?"

He seemed to get confused with the two questions being asked at the one time; unsure of which to answer first and how he could make order out of his perceived confusion.

"Yeah...nah. Tha' me cousin boat....me mudda's brudda..." Appearing addled. "Me mudda's in town." A toss of his head to indicate the direction of town.

The town was about 1½ kays walk up the dirt road that led from the boat ramp. I needed to watch his face to fully comprehend, to hear what he was saying....wrong I guess. Being deaf can be so disrespectful!

The bloke was still in the water. The croc was taking an interest, turning towards us....they all giggled like schoolgirls.

The croc was slowly turning, inching its way towards us at an acute angle to the bank. More

giggles. The guy in the water still splashed about. I looked further up the river. About 10 metres away there was the mouth of a small creek coming into the main river, a shallow mud flat formed a spit, deepening gradually as it thrust further out into the main stream. The water in this area crystal clear; unlike the muddy brown of the larger river. A small croc about a metre long was idly lounging fully submerged with only its eyes and the tiny bulge of its nose protruding above the water's surface, its back feet touching the mud of the spit, its front legs floating. They stuck out from his body as though they were rigid. It was unperturbed by the splashing Ab. still in the water.

I pointed to it without saying anything.

"Yeah....small croc."

As though he knew of its position all along. Probably did!

"Godt anudda 'moke?"

The gin strolled over. The body lying on the sloping bank had slipped down so that his feet were in the water. A cap was pulled over his face and he was pretending to play a guitar using a stick. Strumming a tune only he could hear. The hand movements over the 'pretend frets' were deftly, expertly manoeuvred. The other swollen faced boy lounged in the boat, legs dangling over the side with his feet in the water.

All of indeterminate age.

"Meetings...meetings...always meetings....life seems like one long meeting, one after the other. I know mine did when I was working!"

He didn't seem to grasp what I was talking about. He glanced at me then lowered his head. I told myself that I should keep it simple...there was never going to be some great in-depth discourse on the meaning of life around here.

"Where yuh go?"

"Up to Katherine, then to Darwin."

"Uppa road to da big 'moke?"

As though this was a pearl of wisdom and any town larger than Borroloola cowered under an umbrella of pollution haze. He looked out into the middle of the river where another snout was now visible just breaking the rippled surface. The guy still splashed about with the water level up to his thighs. They jabbered in Abspeak and the boy waded out of the water and struggled up the steep bank. The prostrate guitar strumming youth stood up and the three of them plus the gin strolled over to the tree to sit in a tight circle, my fellow conversationalist leaning back against the tree. My pack of smokes accompanying them. Except the 'foot dangler' who continued with the practice, head now lolling on the seat of the boat. He couldn't see squat....but maybe he was asleep. His 'group' didn't seem to be perturbed by it. The crocs still idly circled getting closer on every turn, the smaller croc at the mouth of the creek had slipped away without me noticing or hearing its departure.

The 'gang' appeared not to now notice my presence and seemed to be engrossed in something that was in the middle of the seated group. They all had their heads and eyes downcast in that direction. No 'good byes'...no 'see yuh'....no 'tanks fa tha' mokes'. They all just sauntered off, obviously finished or bored with the conversation. The crocs lazily floated in the water appearing to have

grown disinterested in the activity or lack of it on the bank. It was difficult to assess their size when all you saw was just two 'blobs', or at that distance and with my eyesight, one blurred blob just breaking the surface of the water.

I walked over to my truck not glancing at the tightly circled group. Opened the door and climbed in, lighting up a smoke from a full packet I had stashed there before starting up the engine and closing the door. I slowly circled the tree that they were seated under. They never looked up, waved or asked 'How's ya father?' at my receding rear-end. They weren't smoking...saving them for later perhaps?... the feet still dangled in the water, his line of sight still below the side of the 'tinnie'....

I drove back to the 'Van Park' for want of a better description, and asked the Manager/Owner about local Charter Fishing Tours on the river.

"Nah...there was only one in town but he's bin packed up for a while."

I'd had a lousy night the night before getting little sleep...but that's another story. I decided to go to the local pub for a feed and a couple of drinks instead of cooking for myself. I didn't feel like it as I was buggered. The pub was full of boisterous Abs. all speaking at once in that strident Abjabber. They outnumbered the 'Whiteys' three to one. Pension pick-up day perhaps, I thought to myself! I fell into a conversation with a bloke at the bar, went shout for shout. A black 'trouper', though he seemed to favour my smokes over his own. Talk got around to 'fissin'.

"Nah...only one charder bloke in town...he famous...godt his pitcha in d' paper.....an' on da telebishun too! Bu' his in jail. He ran ober his missus n gin. Kilt his missus though. If udda way round not mush fuss.....he cooda takin' yuh out fissin..but kilt his missus not his gin!"

Giggled like a schoolgirl, tears welling in his eyes; he almost split his sides!

The crowd was starting to get opinionated and a bit aggro. I walked back to the van and made myself a sandwich and a cup of coffee before hitting the sack. I was rudely awakened in the wee hours of the morning by the loud, strident, drunken words of a mob of Abs. arguing and fighting down in a dried creek bed that ran beside the 'Van Park'. A usual occurrence this time of the week I was told later that morning...I wondered if the 'fortunate' gin was with them and whether the 'waif' would ever 'step' outside the authority of her 'man'?

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12/5/99

TO THE TRUCKY'S DELIGHT

I'd done about 270 kilometres that day having slept at a designated 'Rest Area' the night before that had shot-out 44 gallon drums with heavy duty plastic linings all filled to overflowing with beer bottles. The necessity of tired travellers, the 'pit stop' fill up of long haul drivers. Up here in any case so it seemed! A roofed concrete slab protected a 'picnic' table and bench set of impressive

dimensions. Cyclone proof! Vandal proof! A standpipe and spring loaded tap and a slow turning windmill pumping Artesian water into a nearby bore pool. For stock and 'hardy' drinkers. It clanged noisily and monotonously all night. No other travellers to share my digs. But the birds came in at dusk and sunrise by the hundreds to that oasis. The cattle milled around at dusk ambling off into the distance during the night to return also at daybreak. Lowing incessantly at my intrusion. If I hadn't been awake upon their lowing return, I certainly would have been blasted from sleep by the combined groaning of the herd.

I have this habit of if I feel I've done enough miles, I just stop where-ever that may be. It could be only 50 kilometres which normally was the case but on several occasions it was after 200 to 300 kilometres of easy driving on the long 'hops' of the northern interior. It didn't matter whether I had to 'Bush Camp' off the side of the road, down a dirt track, at a 'Rest Area' or at a Van Park, which was the last choice. Or in one case, under the Expressway that ran between the Gold Coast and Brisbane and only 10 kilometres from an old mate's place or about 40 kilometres from my brother's joint in an outer southern suburb of Brisbane. I slept with the constant whooshing of traffic speeding above me down the multi-laned expressway. To be greeted the next morning by a huge party of road workers and their heavy equipment having a 'cuppa' before starting work. They were upgrading the road from the existing 2 lanes each way to 4. This flyover was their favourite spot for that morning cuppa, out of the dust, noise and sun!

As I said, this day I had had enough after 270 kilometres driving on a one-lane bumpy blacktop with a half lane either side of red dirt and gravel. A drop-off either side to an earth formed storm ditch, dodging oncoming cars, trucks and huge roadtrains. Heading for the ditch whenever those monster 'trains' approach in either direction. Giving them the width of the tarred area. Knowing that if they had to veer off onto the half lane of gravel, it was easy for them with their 3 or 4 trailers behind, to loose control. Especially at the speeds that they always seemed to travel at.

Non-stop. Pedal to the metal. They didn't even stop for a mob of Roos or what-ever that they may have surprised on the narrow blacktop!

I'd filled up and had a cup of coffee at the famous Heartbreak Hotel at Cape Crawford and was heading north again to Borroloola about 100 kilometres away. On a one lane blacktop Development Road. At about 3:30 PM I'd had enough. I was no more than 80 kilometres out from Borroloola. It didn't matter! I started looking for a spot sufficiently off the road not to cause a hazard during the night and away from any artesian bore so that I wouldn't be surrounded by cattle and their accompanying flies when I awoke. The road suddenly widened into a well constructed, almost four lane wide, heavy duty bitumen tarmac, commencing at a similar constructed side road that had a large sign:-

Margaret River Mine T/O
No trespassing
Private Road

No good swinging into there!

"T/O....T/O...What's that?" I mumbled.

God, I can be dumb but my excuse is that the reeling miles of the day had deadened the old brain....I was buggered!

'A mine? I wonder what they mine there? And how do they transfer the ore out? Perhaps it's like the new Century Zinc mine out of Lawn Hill where they will pump the ore sludge through a 600 kilometre pipeline to Karumba for transfer to giant Bulk Carriers anchored in deeper water 150 kilometres out in the Gulf..?'

About one kilometre past the turn off (Ah...T/O!!!) on a straight stretch of road, I was able to get off, down the shoulder across the ditch and onto comparatively flat, spinifex free ground, no-where near a sump or bore hole. About 20 metres from the road and about 1 metre below the road shoulder. Set up camp, had a beer, wrote up my diary entry, mused over rhyming verse, had tea and cleaned up before dusk.

Three roadtrains went past. I didn't notice them, presumably triple decked, three trailer cattle trains. As the sun set about 6:30 PM, I was lounging in my bed reading a book when the van started shaking. The inside lit up, light reflected through the rear 'poptop' flap. I stood on the bed peering through the flap. Six anti-aircraft searchlight beams plus two headlights blinded me...bearing down on me. The tremors increased. The noise of a roaring motor changing gears amplified through the van. With a blast of an air-horn, diesel motor straining and a gust of air that almost caused the van to flip over, the behemoth passed vanishing into the night in a blur of clearance and tail lights.

I then knew how they transported the ore to the dock of transfer!

Now I don't like driving at night or worse, having to extricate my rig out of a tricky spot after dark or trying to find a more suitable location to bed down for the night...not in the dark! And besides, I'd driven far enough for the day. I thought it was sometimes opportune to be deaf, this being one of those times. I could just roll over and completely block out the noise. The violent swaying of the van on each pass maybe another matter!!

I later gleaned from those non talking locals that these Roadtrains are extra long rigs used only on the stretch of road between the mine and Bing Bong, which was the transfer point, about a 200 kilometre round trip. These Transporters are made up of 24-wheeled trailers, 3 to a train, with a 14-wheeled prime mover having a 600hp diesel giant of a motor. Each trailer carries 2 rotating hopper bins approximately 6 by 3 by 3 metres wide with each bin carrying 70 tonnes of ore...420 tonnes in total! There were 4 'rigs' in total, each rig doing 4 return trips for a 10-hour shift. They will be doubling the number of 'rigs' in the next two weeks but at the moment that's 32 times those 'rigs' passed my van from 7:30 pm to 6:00 am the next morning.

Groaning, roaring, whooshing, trembling and blasting past me!!!!

I didn't get much sleep that night!

The next morning bleary-eyed I broke camp and headed for the shoulder of the road just as one of those monsters appeared around the curve onto the straight travelling towards me going in the same direction as I intended. I allowed it to pass; drawing in behind it further up the road as it strained up a slight incline at 60 kph. Broaching the crest, a scratchy squawk came over the CB.

"Take a copy? Black Patrol towing a van."

"Loud and clear mate." I responded.

"You gotta straight, clear road ahead, come past buddy."

"No thanks if it's OK by you." I replied. "At the 80 kph that I do, you'll soon catch me up. I couldn't think of anything worse than your big rig bearing down on me or worse still, overtaking me! I'll stay behind...don't want to shit myself!"

A laugh came back.

“She’s sweet mate...your call...but on some of these hills (?) I struggle to make 40.”

“Not a worry chief.”

By this stage we were going down the other side of the incline. Me 80; him 95. The 3 trailer hook-up snaked and swerved within the confines of his lane. The rear of the last trailer occasionally swayed and whipped across the centre line or onto the gravel verge. Like a ‘congo line’ of roller skaters with the last skater getting the ride of his life in a formed deliberate whip. At the next laboured incline I caught up with him again and dropped back to be about 60 metres behind him.

“Got copy? Me again, the black Patrol and van behind you.”

“Got you in my blinkers.... loud and clear”

“How do you drive those things? They must be a bloody hand full?”

“With a bloody steering wheel just like yours!”

A laugh at his own joke.

He continued. “Yeah, they can get a bit hairy at times. I suspect it’s like piloting a 747 when the wings suddenly drop off...gets a bit soapy.” Another laugh at his own joke. “We started doing 3 trips a shift but some-one in their wisdom has upped it to 4...they must need the money to pay for the extra rigs that are coming. Some-one’s gunna get killed one of these days. We average 8 roos and 3 steers each day. Once these buggers start to roll there’s no stopping them! You hardly feel anything as you go over a steer!”

“Hazards of the job I guess...better you than I”

He again rolled away, the rear trailer continued to veer around. I caught up with him again on the next incline.

“Where you heading?”

A short appreciation of my meanderings then ensued.

“I’d love to do that one of these days but me missus, she’s a stayput...could only do it if I divorced her”

“Know what you mean...that’s the only way I got away to do it too!”

A chuckle came back.

“Hey...you were the rig on the side of the road last night? How did you sleep?”

“I didn’t! But it was my fault; I should have clicked to what was going on. Ignorance is no excuse. I think they passed me at least 30 times last night; even blurring on their horns for the entire length of the straight!”

Another chuckle came back.

“Jeez...that’s all right...sounds like they may have got in four loads apiece. These buggers stay on the road 24 hours a day. Saw you parked on the side of the road there as I came back on my last leg

yesterday arvo. Knew you were going to get a pasting from the night guys. You would have made their night, given them something to cackle about over the CB.”

“Yeah...made my night too! Something I won’t forget in a hurry!”

He began to draw away on the flat straight road ahead of us.

“See ya buddy...keep safe...luck for a good night’s sleep to-night. I’ll tell the night boys you pass on your thanks for them looking over you.”

“Yeah...do that...you have a safe one too...all the best, out.”

I dawdled into Borroloola booking into the only Van Park in the burg. I was asleep by 7:30 but was awakened by the screams and swearing of drunken Abs down in the dry creek bed beside the van park.

Ahhh! The quiet and solitude of the Australian bush!

But that’s another story!

pcb©

13/5/99

APOSTLEBIRDS

I was woken by the strident call of Apostlebirds. There must have been hundreds of them, complaining bitterly of my intrusion into their area. Congregating, arguing, and bickering between themselves with rasping, grating notes. There was no melody or singsong in their repertoire.

Another rig had arrived during the night. I hadn’t even heard its arrival! Sparkling clean tandem axle van, a brand-new Nissan Patrol LWB colour coordinated to the van. It was parked out on the perimeter of the ‘off road’ Rest Area.

I got up and made myself some coffee; the sudden swaying of the van on its wheels from my movements inside must have alarmed the Apostlebirds as they took wing in fright in a niggling, bickering mass. I emerged from the van and sat under the awning sipping coffee watching the bird life around me. The morning with that chill soon after sunrise. It was too early for breakfast.

The Apostlebirds had settled around the water tank still bickering, arguing, sermonising, and lecturing.

Like the Orange and the Green both proudly Irish but with an irretrievable difference of opinion on religion. Having forgotten the original cause of dissent; both filled with a religious fervour and righteousness. Bickering amongst themselves; hating each other.

A Black Kite glided down swooping over the top of the massed congregation causing a panicky take-off. A million black wings fluttered like a fright of 'Flying Nuns' with Habits flapping.

They rose raucously into the air settling just as quickly into nearby surrounding trees still bickering. A couple of Friarbirds added their own louder, raucous call into the cacophony, proud of their ability to rasp louder. A swoop of Finches wheeled in to inspect the now cleared ground around the water tank then clouded into nearby bushes. Then singularly, at almost heartbeat tempo, they flew down to the empty ground until the area was covered with a hopping, sweet chirping, feathered mass. Then, as if their leader had given a stern command, they took off en mass. A huge, weaving cloud of single noted chirps wheeled into the bushes again. To replace the vivid green with a brown stain.

I could not determine the cause of this sudden mass exodus; maybe it was nothing. Maybe it was just the timidity of the species. In bickering untidy clusters, the Apostlebirds descended again. A flurry of wings and angry hops denoted their continued disagreements.

The rig from up the back crawled past me to stop beside one of a number of 44 gallon drums that was used as garbage tins. A bloke got out of the 4WD to deposit his garbage accumulated from the night before.

"G'day....hope we didn't keep you awake last night? Had the 'gennie' going. The batteries were getting down." A squat man, almost as wide as he was tall. Middle age spread commenced at double chins to billow to a wide girth of a stomach.

"No." I replied, seated in my lounge chair with my feet resting on the bottom step of the van. "I didn't even hear you come in last night."

He looked at my rig.

"Nice van," he said.

I looked at it. The once glossy white finish of the van sides appeared to be bleeding, no, gushing blood. It was the red dust of the miles, which slathered every surface. By comparison his van had just been purchased from the Dealership located at the entrance to the Rest Area or so it seemed as it glowed like a product that had only been removed from its packaging this moment.

"Thanks." I genuinely said. "BIT filthy at the moment. It'll need a bloody good wash by the time I get to Darwin though." Stating the obvious; an understatement to be sure. "You've got a good looking combo as well!" I added, patronisingly. Feeling sure that that was what he wanted to hear. All the bells and whistles.

"You from Sydney?" He asked.

We exchanged 'flags of origin'. He from Narrabeen, me from Terrigal. He'd met a lot of people from the Central Coast during his travels doing the same thing. Ahhhh!...God's Country! So had I, which surprised me.

If it was God's Country, why were the masses leaving?

"Doing the 'Big One' we are."

Hitching up his shorts from where they'd slipped to a lesser line of resistance.

"Yeah, we're averaging about 500 kays a day!" He proudly stated as he glanced lovingly at the apple of his eye, then at his missus who was perched delicately on the front passenger seat, a resigned smile on her face. She gave me a limp smile in response to my 'G'day'. I didn't have the heart to tell him I was averaging less than 80 kays a day. Different timetables for different folks; different strokes for different blokes. I was on the edge of asking him when he got the time to wash his rig, but perhaps instead of 'doing' the sight-seeing things after pitching camp, he got the polishing rag out...that's what it looked like in any case!

"Where you bin?" He asked as he rattled off his route, all on the black top, the major ones. A blur as they drove through, remarking nonchalantly to his missus, 'What a nice place...we should go back there one day and stay awhile,' I sarcastically thought to myself. Instead I gave him a 'Cook's Tour' of my meanderings.

"Jeez...bin off the track a bit! Well, gotta keep going.....good travelling. Might see ya down the track a bit...ya gonna stay here?....long?"

"I don't know...I haven't had breakfast yet....have a safe one." I didn't add that if I blinked I'd probably miss him by several hundred kays and then he'd more than likely be just a blur as he sped through!

He drove off with a wave of his hand and a toot on the horn causing the Apostlebirds and Finches to rise into the air from their respective perches, a combination of grating and sweet notes. The Apostlebirds scrambled around in an uncoordinated circle to land near the water tank again to continue their theological argument. The Finches again stained a bush chirping incessantly. A crow circled above me, answering its own question and somewhere off in the bush a songbird sang a melodious clear tune afraid to show itself in case it was attacked by the envious, niggling congregation.

I cooked breakfast, eating it seated as before, the Apostlebirds chastising each other raspily as they drew nearer hoping to needle me out of my food. I contemplated sermonising to them on the doctrines of the Mormon Church but thought better of it. It would possibly cause further bickering and disagreement; murder and mayhem perhaps.

Like the Irish... self-destructing.

I wondered who for God's sake would have named them Apostlebirds?

Their constant bickering, needling and cajoling was far from recognised religious behaviour.

Or was it?

If they'd been present at the Crucifixion which I doubted...but if they had... congregated around the "Hill" constantly bickering, needling in an aggravating manner, I guess you could interpret...I....I...could infer by their manner the following mass comment,

“Come on...get offa there...we need that wood for a roost!”

Hardly a call that warranted the name Apostlebird!

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A YOUNG BOY’S DREAM SHATTERED

I can vaguely remember as a young boy being in a canoe or kayak, I can’t recall which, or who’s it was. But I can remember gliding over a dead smooth surface of a lake early one morning, the splish-splash of dipping paddle the only sound. Mist lying just above the water’s mirrored surface. The sharp bow slicing through it spilling the mist eddies down either side of the craft in exact reflection of the bow wake. I don’t remember who was with me...they were more than likely doing the paddling.

But you know how the romanticism of time blurs the detail.

I mean, I would have been daydreaming knowing me! Picturing in my mind’s eye Sitting Red Bull seated regally as his faithful braves silently paddled down the river. The rest of the tribe strung out behind sneaking their way past the formation of ‘pale skins’ in blue coats noisily readying themselves for the surprise (?) dawn raid on the now deserted Indian encampment. Ah!... the dreams of lads. Even then, cheering for the underdog to prevail over superior forces.

So it became a secret desire of mine long held, to own a canoe. But being from a lower income bracket family, I doubted whether I’d ever find one under the Christmas tree...and besides, we lived absolute miles from any waterway. Even then I was a realist, if it is possible to be one at the same time as also being a ‘Dreamer’! The more practical choice was a push-bike; after all, I knew I could never keep up with my mates as they furiously pedalled their bikes down some hill with me behind paddling a canoe.

I’ve been told I do that quite often....paddle my own canoe that is...sometimes a virtue; sometimes a vice!

In this later life, after contemplating for some years this premature retirement and doing the ‘Big

One', I knew that there would be innumerable occasions when some form of water transport would not only be advisable but downright profitable in terms of relaxation, satisfaction and most importantly, in gaining access into the more inaccessible fishing locations. In fact, a mate and I visited annual Boat Shows during the same period that I frequented the large annual Caravan Show at Rose Hill to peruse and finally decide on a suitable van for my expedition.

Even now I still wonder if I got that right!

But that's another story.

Again, after inspecting several types and sizes of 'tinnies', I realistically came to the conclusion that a 'tinny' with outboard motor and all the associated paraphernalia was perhaps a little unyielding for me to handle single-handedly doing the trip by myself. So a canoe/kayak emerged as the favoured option. Although I can remember at one stand occupying the Salesman for a fair while with him thinking perhaps, that he had a sale for his 'you beaut, mickey mouse inflatable' until I asked him rather deadpan, "Yes, I reckon it just maybe the ticket, exactly what I want.....but is it crocodile proof?" He walked off in a huff, bad PR I thought!

Now here I am on my fourth attempt to circumnavigate this great land of ours, by road of course. Solo. I've almost purchased a kayak in Caloundra but the truck was playing up at the time and I didn't want to blow the budget. At Townsville on two occasions I almost purchased a kayak, on the last occasion I had my chequebook out, but something held me back. At Swansea I almost bought a cheap second hand one...as scarce as hen's teeth I was told...but it was navy blue....it would have clashed with the black of my truck!

This being my most successful and farthest reaching of all my attempts to leave Sydney behind me, I have been disappointed on numerous occasions and chastised myself severely for not having 'a boat'. Idyllic waterways and fishing 'heavens' have remained out of my reach because of the lack of a kayak..... a canoe!

It happened by accident actually. I was at Mataranka Thermal Springs hemmed in and feeling claustrophobic by the myriad caravans, pop tops, fold-outs, etc. All the van persuasions and varieties with their grey haired occupants. After being 'Bush' for most of the previous 5 weeks I was slipping into a catatonic state. At so many vans, so many people and the 'crush' that they seemed to enjoy.

The old couple to my right was nestled close in a campervan. They could hardly walk; both had 'hearing aids' and 'Coke bottle' glasses.

But they had a zest for life and happy dispositions. George and Bernie from Red Head near Newcastle previously from Cessnock. He took great delight in proudly displaying his 'inventions', most of which were available over the counter, worked better, all made better and were definitely 'finished off' better. But he was proud of his 'handiwork'. They befriended people who could 'ferry' them around in their cars to other 'touristy' spots nearby. I didn't see them go for a swim in 'The Springs' or go for walks down the riverbank. They played their radio exorbitantly loud especially when their beloved Knights were playing a game of footie. Halfway through the night you'd hear a phlegmy cough, a wheeze, a "Whatcha say George?...speak up...ya know I'm deaf!" Every night around the same time....but a funny, lovely couple.

Gutsy.

The bloke and his missus behind me were also a lovely couple. An old dual axle van that had seen better days, with a tattered, scarred and bleached awning attached. But they never seemed to do anything but just sat under their awning reading....writing. He would though, just on sun-up, get on

an old exercise bike that he had positioned between the rear of his and my vans. I was usually awake by then but oh!....the whirr of the wheel, the grind of the oil starved chain and ball bearings seemed to go on and on. I said to him one morning after I had been on a bike ride 'up the road' for a couple of hours why he didn't get a push bike to pedal around instead of being stationary. He just looked at me blankly as though the idea hadn't occurred to him. After sometime he replied that he couldn't see the sense in sitting on a bike pedalling down some road and then having to turn around and come back again! As though the rear views of two vans were more preferable than a looking at the countryside. I couldn't figure it...later we entered into a protracted conversation on the attributes of supposedly specialised 'Off-road Caravans' with him of the opinion that they were a total waste of money and that he would never contemplate the purchase of one. But by his own admission, he had never taken his 'rig' onto a dirt road and his final comment on the subject was "What do you think I am, stupid!.....the van would fall apart on the corrugations!"

Maybe it was just his version of a dry sense of humour....or else he was stupid!

The couple to my left was nestled in so close that their van was almost touching my awning which was only half 'extended'. A practise I rigidly adhered to after nearly having it blown away at both Tuross Heads and Port Macquarie. I was amazed at the time that no damage had been done to it! But that is how crammed in all the rigs were at this spot. But anyway, the couple to my left was from Tasmania. \$1500 for their channel crossing but he reckoned it would be about \$1000 for my rig. A "nice bloke", "educated", "a thinker", the most bigoted man I think I've ever met...his missus rarely left the inside of the van, the air-conditioning humming loudly all day and night as she felt the heat....it rarely had got above 30-35 degrees! I thought they were bloody nice days! They were both youngish retirees. A brand new twenty-two footer with a brand new 4WD. It seemed that they were doing the 'big one' out of sufferance, not knowing what else they were going to do with their retirement time. We talked a fair bit actually about a lot of things...the state of the Amenities Blocks from here to Tasmania, the amount of dust, dirt, flies and bush (as if he could not think of another name for the 'scrub' in Central Australia), the current world crisis, cricket and Boonie, the absolute abhorrence on the behaviour and condition of the 'mainland' Abs. He reckoned that Tasmania had invented the "Final Solution" and not Hitler and it was tragic that mainland Australia had not adopted a similar social solution as he felt that we would pay for our liberalism in the not to distant future!

A Camper trailer hung off the rear bumper of the 'Tassie' rig. Three young kids constantly tested the security and sturdiness of the 'pull out' bed sections by bouncing savagely on them. They were continuously scampering under or into some one else's van.

Their mother yelling in a 'Cooee' voice day and night,

"Children...where are you? Mark...Maarrk...Bennnyyy!"

This always confused the 'Old Girl' next to me. She would come scampering out of their Campervan,

"Is that you George? Where are you?"

Comedy Capers for sure!

"Jessie...where are you?" The mother continuing in soprano voice.

Upon learning of their whereabouts, usually being scatted out of some-one else's van, she'd disappear into her own. At night the youngest, Jessie, would commence crying and would only stop

after she had succeeded in making her brothers cry, usually about 2:00 am in the morning. But they were also a nice couple who seemed to have the patience of saints with their kids. I got on fine with the kids, they were OK, just a little wayward and bored...but I couldn't speak on behalf of those around me in that regard. Especially the 'Tassies' beside me who seemed to grit their teeth and flee to the inside of their van locking the door safely absconded within, well out of the way of those three pocket sized tornadoes.

I'd go for a walk, a swim in the thermal pool or a gander at the ingenuity of fellow travellers with their rigs. Always falling into extended conversations, boasts proudly exclaimed. Before I had tea I'd always sit outside and update my diary, beer in hand. This became a lure for both George and Tassie to wander over for a chat and to nick one of my cold beers.

"Nice drop....icy cold!" But never bringing their own. Insanity was knocking on my door. I'd developed a tic, a spasm of the neck muscles and left shoulder blade. I expected the 'hunch' to appear very shortly.

I hid the axe!

George sauntered over empty beer 'cooler' in hand. Tassie and his missus had just returned from a swim...very soothing but too many people. They'd actually driven into Mataranka Township to replenish supplies. Oh!...the prices, the Aborigines! They went into Katherine thinking that the prices for Groceries would be far cheaper up there and there wouldn't be an Ab. in sight!!! A nice drive of around 220 kays return! They were oblivious to the absurd economics of it...or the fact that there was just as many Abs. if not more in Katherine....what the hell did they expect anywhere up here in the north! George and Bennie had been "chauffeured" to Elsey National Park about 20 kays away. A nice spot according to them. On the Roper River where the camping area was a series of 'looped roads' with camping spots indented around on the outside, each separated by dense bush so that your neighbour only about 5 metres away, could not be seen. A BBQ pit, a timber picnic table and bench at every 'camping spot'. The Amenities block was bigger and cleaner than that at Mataranka. The camping area almost empty, no water or power 'hook-up'. Fishing, swimming, kayaks for hire...even a boat ramp! Bike/walking trails that followed the river for miles. The Mataranka Falls downstream about 4 ½ kays via one of those walking trails. A horseshoe shaped cascade with two hot mineral springs forming part of the white water...hot and cold. They hadn't walked to the cascades, but they were told that that was what was there.

Salvation...a timely gift from the Gods...even if 'he' didn't leave any coin on the frig for beer drunk!

Even though I'd booked in and paid for two more nights I made the van shipshape ready for an early departure the next morning.

I woke at sunrise and joined the flurry of activity as ¾ of the Park rattled, plonked, wound and clanged their imminent departure. Like moths to a flame they were drawn inexplicitly to the receding blacktop. We all left within a matter of minutes of one another or so it seemed, leaving a park devoid of wheeled mechanicals, to await the next monstrous wave of gypsies who would appear miraculously by mid afternoon. Every-one except me turning right after leaving the Caravan Park to head for the highway.

I turned left heading further up the road to the National Park.

I had this vision of a long snaking traffic line, one heading up from the south, the other heading away to the north clogging up the highway like two large chronic aneurisms in an artery!

Both 'clots' propping for an overnight stay at the Mataranka Springs Homestead and Caravan Park. A quick dip, something to eat, a night's sleep and off they go again!

Clotting up the highway north and south.....

With Elsey National Park, which was small compared to other NPs, being only 16 kays away, I got there by 9:30 am in the morning low on supplies after nearly 2 weeks on the road since the last major supplies pit stop at Mt. Isa 1500 kilometres ago. But I could survive for about a month ducking into my emergency rations of dried and canned vegetables, rice and pasta packs and 'long life' milk. But I only had a '6 pack' of beer left and an almost depleted carton of wine before I'd need to dip into the panic 'kit' of bottled wine and port.

Cigarettes were not a problem.

I spent some time cruising the 'clover leaves' of the loop road before marking my spot and setting up camp. Lovely, my ideal 'bush camping' Park that is easily accessible for those who are terrified to get off the bitumen but who would still extend themselves by 'bush camping'. But the only other campers who were there, were obviously 'like minded' as I and not "the gleaming white rigs of black top only" persuasion.

I can't figure them!

A profusion of bird life with a much larger variety than was evident at the "Homestead", large shade trees, privacy, peace and serenity.

I unhooked the bike, slipped on a hat, T-shirt, togs, sunscreen, sunnies and with my knapsack bulging with my camera gear, drinking water and multi-purpose Wedderspoon imitation knife, I pedalled out intending to do the 9 kilometre return ride to Mataranka Falls via the meandering trail that followed the river that George had told me about. A dense narrow band of foliage edged the riverbanks on both sides. Tall spindly Palms as though they had been planted by hand to form an 'edging' on the river. A necklace of green foliage. Fallen tree trunks were everywhere with palm tops lopped off. A decaying carpet of fronds covered the ground; the tall Palms almost overshadowed by huge Paperbark and Ghost Gums behind and intermingled leaning drunkenly towards or over the water. Everywhere the debris of past floods. Grasses, smaller tree trunks and twisted limbs caught haphazardly 4-5 metres up in the forks of the larger trees. Glimpses of floods and frantic wets gone past.

I pedalled past the boat ramp, kayaks and canoes up-ended sunning their rumps, drying like SBS-shaped tortoises on the small grassy verge that fronted a floating pontoon that served as the 'dock' beside the ramp.

Further downstream, the swimming pontoons anchored from the bank. A large grassy slope hacked from the tree line providing a vantage point for nervous parents as their kids jumped off the pontoon jetty and swam amongst the crocs! I continued on, over, really through a small 'crick' bubbling in excitement as it rushed towards the languid waters of the Roper.

Then clunk! Thick, fine dust became the bike trail that caused me to dismount. Impossible to ride over. I pushed the bike forward thinking that around the next bend it would improve giving me more solid ground and better purchase for bike riding. I plodded on sending up whiffs of fine talc at each footfall and sinking almost to my ankles. The tyre and rim of the bike wheels submerging into the fine hot mire. The recently applied oil over chain and gear-sprockets attracting a caking of dust

threatening to revive the paralysis in quick time that I had spent some hours freeing at Mataranka. I pushed stubbornly on for the next 1½ kilometres. Nothing changed, still another 3.1 kays to the falls mockingly carved into a directional sign. I retraced my steps, the wheel furrows clearly indenting my passage. My back screamed, my shoulders cried, my forearms and legs tortured, my feet scalding from the boiling hot talc. I only had my sandals on! I got back to the 'swimming pontoons', laid down on the warm hardwood planking which covered the blue plastic barrel 'floats' lapping up the warmth of the sun, resting strained muscles. I drank some water and chain smoked to catch my breath. I dived into the water and floated out into the middle of the river which was about 200 metres wide, basking like an Otter sanguine in this relaxing, 'floating on my back' position.

I had another swim later that afternoon in preference to a solar heated shower. Breath-stroked all the way across the river and free-styled back to ease frozen and tortured muscles before shouting myself a beer.

I had another swim the next morning about an hour after sun-up, before breakfast. It was a bit chilly but I needed to work my tired muscles.

I was going kayaking to-day!!!

While I was swimming a middle-aged Pommy couple tentatively stood on the pontoon. Glaringly bright in their sun starved bodies.

"Wot arboot d' lizards?" He nervously asked trying to impress with the idiom.

"Oh....you'll usually see 'im about 100 yards off...if ya don't see 'im after that, ya swim like 'ell to get outa the water...!" Overdoing the Strine and nasal tone.

She quickly retreated off the pontoon to the safety of the bank and ordered her companion to do likewise. We walked back to our respective rigs, theirs an 'Oz, Britsabroad, Over the top, Round Australia, Hertz' campervan.

They went for a shower to cool off.

It was warming up.

I didn't bother to lessen their anxiety by informing them that there was only 'Freshies' up here....or so the Ranger had told me!

After breakfast and clearing up, I packed my photographic paraphernalia, lure box, skinning knife, a couple of water bottles and binnies into my water-tight, agitator washing drum, slung my tripod and camera cases over my back and did the pre-requisite slip, slop, slap before heading to the Ranger's hut to lease my kayak.

I informed him that I would only be about 3 hours max., but if I hadn't returned by nightfall, to send out the trackers!

"Oh, no..." He replied laconically. "We don't do that. We just hold an auction at your rig!"

Nice bloke.

"I'd say looking at you, that I'll see you in about an hour! If that!"

Full of assurances. He liked his cricket too. I don't know why but I seem to bring out the comic, the absurd in people. I gathered up the paddle and life preserver and headed for the boat ramp.

Now, me being slightly more 'portlier' than the small boy I once was, the getting into and out of and the stowing of equipment, fishing rods, tripod, etc. while wearing an outdated WW2 reject, bulky life preserver is quite a trick, especially by yourself with no one to steady the craft....Oh! To be a crow in a tree so to speak. Watching me comically launch this kayak grabbing all my gear from the bank and safely stowing it as the thing rocks, jolts, sways, spins and drifts away from the bank and where the double bladed oar still languished.....it happened several times in fact. Made all the worse by the fact that at water's edge there was either slimy rocks in the shallows giving you no purchase or knee deep water where you immediately sunk up to your waist in the oozing, sucking mud on the bottom. It's impossible to launch yourself aboard a kayak from that position!

Eventually I figured it out.

I sat the kayak half in the water and half-scraping on the concrete boat ramp.... (Jeez, you couldn't call me slow!) I reloaded it with all my gear, slid myself into the 'cockpit' and just gently pushed her out into the water. It was obvious that this was the way it had been done innumerable times before as the centre webbing strip on the underside of the hull had all but worn away and was hanging loose for half its length....but there was no leaks. I checked that out as soon as I was floating free of the ramp surface. I never gave another thought to the webbing dangling free which would cause considerable drag as I paddled away...like I said, I ain't slow!

These things are surprisingly light and buoyant and once you get the 'feel' for the thing, quite stable and easy to control and manoeuvre.

I decided to head downstream.

Not that the flow was helpful as the river was deep, wide and languid with only a minuscule current flow. It was just that each early afternoon, a brisk to fresh nor'easter sprung up and had done so for the previous week. I knew coming back upstream I would not be hampered by much of a current but would appreciate 'going' with the wind and not 'deadhead' into it after paddling about for several hours.

So off I paddled...Chief Sitting Bull silently passing the "Paleskins in blue coats". The only sound the splish-splash of blade dipping into the water.

I guess my action needed refinement as on every stroke I was showered with water dripping off the end of the blade. But what the heck, it was a warm day with the sun beaming down, so the cascade of water helped to keep me cool. I hung out a lure watching it 'work' as the rod tip bobbed rhythmically. I eased down the river in this manner for about 500 metres. No hits, no takes. As I mentioned before, the banks were a mish-mash, a maze of broken, fallen tree trunks and limbs deeply shadowed by overhanging trees and foliage. From my lower seated position in the kayak, the vegetation on the banks appeared more impenetrable than when viewed from the bike. The snags, submerged branches and limbs prevented access to the banks or even from getting close to them. It was prime Barra country!

I slinked silently into various spots deep in shadow, up or downstream from protruding limbs and snags, spinning into and around them. As I've said previously, these kayaks are quite buoyant; any action has an immediate reaction. Just spinning caused the kayak to move, to rotate, to go backwards, everything you didn't want it to do! Half the time I was spinning in an unbalanced position, my body twisted from the waist up. But I only got snagged about 6 times, twice in

overhead foliage, the rest amongst the dead wood and snags, but the lures were easily extracted. I got two definite hits with one possible! But no takes. I continued in this manner zigzagging from bank to bank, trolling whenever I traversed the expanse of waterway. I was thoroughly engrossed, enraptured in the beautiful surroundings, engaged in spinning, trolling and paddling. It was about noon by this stage, the sun high and warm. A little cooling breeze skipped straight up the river. I saw a flurry of activity in the distance, the breaking of the water surface. No 'hurries', they'll still be there as I gently drifted towards them, working the bank, trolling the deep water. I was getting quite proficient at it. Overhead when I could, side cast and/or whip cast when snags dictated such an action. These though, did cause more 'Christmas trees' far too often with precious time taken up to untangle them. The surface activity drawing closer and closer until I realised that it wasn't a fish frenzy, or crocs. The water flow was slowly accelerating to a line of cascades. I reeled in and stowed the rod between my knees then paddled towards the white water but keeping clear of the fingers of influence that would drag me over the precipice.

I inspected the smooth fall of water, the white water, the line of exposed rock and the jumble of boulders that were strewn around.

It was an "M" shaped, single line of cascade. The legs of the "M" pointed downstream. The left hand leg and inverted "U" a clogged mish-mash of logs and debris held against the current by several large boulders. The right hand "U" was a flat rock ledge where water spilled deeply yet smoothly over, while the right hand leg was a series of small rock-formed ledges that the water bubbled, pummelled and gurgled down. Below it, two large deep splash pools were divided at the middle 'leg' by again, a mishmash of logs, branches and debris. Upstream on the right hand leg before the 'rock steps' there was also deep water. Slowed by the ledge, the water formed a small 'crick' going further downstream at the higher level, but curved away from the cascade area. Slow moving, quite deep, around 6 metres wide and about 200 metres long lined with an entanglement of mangrove roots and foliage.

I paddled around the top of the cascade, silently drifting into the mouth of this 'crick'. A croc slithered from between mangrove roots not more than 5 metres in front of me and silently entered the water. It seemed about as long as my kayak. Another one further up, smaller, quickly slid into the water followed by two similar sized mates. A larger one turned away into the mangrove roots and headed frantically towards another channel.

"Freshies," I muttered, consoling myself, re-assuring myself....not even contemplating the dangerous alternative. "Freshies", I kept repeating!

The end of this 'crick' suddenly tapered, the quicker flow of water caused by this restriction rippling. The sound of water rushing over another cascade as it possibly joined the main stream after its fall. I didn't need to paddle but let the flow carry me towards the restriction of the neck spinning to both banks as I drifted. I got two savage hits and a take with a broaching of the surface of the water before it spat the lure. It was my fault as I forgot in my excitement to hold the rod tip up high and the line tight; what with the crocs and all....I retraced my course trolling a lure until I again emerged onto the top of the falls.

What the heck....I'm this far....might as well give it a go...get a buzz....I should be able to negotiate back up the cascade.....?!!

I aimed where the water wasn't breaking, burbling or splashing. Where the water poured like smooth silk over the abyss. Where the splash pool below didn't seem to have any shallow sections; or debris; or rocks....dug the paddle in deep and picked up speed, the flow eventually catching me and helping to throw me over the abyss. It wasn't a case of teetering on the edge and having second

thoughts....more like a shot out of a cannon. I landed deftly, balanced and...upright in the splash pool below.....luckily!

What a buzz!

Then I looked back up at the cascades....from my seated position in the kayak the height seemed insurmountable! In reality only about 450-600 mm. I didn't want to think about the consequences of my foolhardiness; I was still on a high....

The current caught me as I mused, taking me obliquely away from the falls then circled me around in calmer waters back towards and almost in the shadow of the ledge line. The place I'd want to be if I was a fish lurking and waiting for any morsel that may be flung over the falls and sucked back into this vortex.

I wrestled the rod out from between my knees and changed to another lure for change sake only and began to cast and retrieve through this pool.

Now on the memorable 'Barra Tour' of some 7 years ago, we had 3 boats, four of us to each boat which included the 'Guide' who was also the "de-snagger, Christmas tree free-er, lure changer, fish getter-offerer, new line tie-er and pistol wielder." We just cast and retrieved. The 'tinnies' were low sided, flat decked, double-hulled, wide-beamed 16-18 footers. Whenever one of us got a 'hook-up' the others would frantically wind in their lines. This was necessary especially with the larger Barra, GTs, Redfin and Mangrove Jack because they could go anywhere as you fought to bring them in. As long as you kept the rod tip up and the line tight, you had them. You could find yourself with some of the fish circling around the boat three or four times fighting, the fish trying to either spit the lure with acrobatic surface displays or it heading for snags, deep water or coral overhangs.

But the boat regardless of your inexperience, tomfoolery or premature boasting of this one being the biggest yet, always remained stable....rock solid!

The other adrenaline rushing, fortuitous 'freebie' at Karumba of very recent time where bigger, more powerful and determined fish were caught was aboard a 36-40 foot deep-veed, twin hulled fibre-glass monster powered by two 200hp giants of motors. It had all the state of the art communications and electronic depth and fish seeking devices, computer charting, etc. and was captained by a rough diamond of a man and his missus. A great couple!...and not just because they took me on the 'freebie' fishing trip!!! The boat was not ideally suited to the "walk around" fishing that we struck on several occasions when we hooked onto some big Salmon, ferocious Mackerel, lively Tuna, solid Grunter or heavy Shark. You invariably had to clamber, quickly I might add, up from the rear fishing well onto the forward anchor deck passing the rod dexterously around the rear cabin roof support uprights, the flying deck superstructure and other little bits and pieces and antennae. Because of the speed of these larger fish which forced you into this feverish activity, you often had to reef and reel and run all at the same time. On more than one occasion, I had to circle the boat and this obstacle course trying to reel some monster in only to have the 100-150lb. breaking strain line snap, almost causing me on one occasion to be catapulted backwards into the sea! But all the base... the boat, remained solid; stable.

I got a hook-up on my second cast into the vortex of the splashpool. I've got light tackle compared

to the heavy-duty gear that was used in the above episode (it wasn't mine, it came with the boat). This requires a deft hand to allow drag control and rod manipulation to steer, to manoeuvre the fish so caught, to eventually tire it into submission instead of the brute force used with the heavier gear bringing it to the net. Both hands working the rod and reel. But as I said before, these kayaks are surprisingly buoyant and with both hands busy on the rod and reel, they are completely unmanageable. You are at the mercy and the whim of the fish. The bigger the fish the more frantic are the reactions of the kayak, rudderless and powerless. It wasn't a case of you bringing the fish to you, more of you reeling yourself towards the fish!

I was spun, rotated, pulled, yanked, and reversed in an alarming display of uncontrollability back and forth across the splash pool. Only once did I sight 'colour', the brilliant silver-white flash of a Barra...I'd say about 700-800 mm long...but I won't swear to that! This knowledge was accepted with some relief because at one point I thought I may have hooked into a croc! I mean, you can't walk around the deck of a kayak, bracing your feet against some solid piece of metal while your arms strain. You can only half twist your body around while in a seated position, your legs cocooned in the shell not even being able to bend your knees. Also in trying to minimise the violent turns of the fish, I was rotating my body from the waist up regularly which caused a worrying 'flip-flop' rocking action of the kayak. Eventually after a monumental struggle, the bloody thing actually 'spat' the lure! I reckon as much to his relief as mine. I was afraid that the constant struggle of the fish may attract the attention of the "Freshies" known to favour Barra, with me unfortunately, being caught in the middle..... so to speak!

I retrieved my lure and paddled down away from the splash pool going about halfway down the length of this section of the river before it broke into a myriad fast flowing channels rushing to the next set of cascades. I beached the kayak sinking immediately knee deep in fine silty sand. I unloaded it and dragged it up out of the water, turning it over to lean it against a fallen Palm Tree trunk. It drained a surprising amount of water that had been slopping around under my bum. I had a drink of water, an apple and a couple of smokes as I tried to chart an 'overland' route back to the splash pool, hoping to again engage the Barra in conflict if he was so inclined. I didn't have a clue where I could put him to transport him back to 'base', with very little available space in the kayak. Maybe just a photo or two then a 'throw back!' The day was now getting hot. The area where I took solitude protected from the fresh nor'easter that had now sprung up. You could hear it whistling through the top of the trees.

There was a deep billabong or a dead-end section of the river visible through the Paperbarks and Palm Trees with tannin stained deep water, the ground relatively free of debris except for fallen palm logs. The ground sandy raised in spits and shoals. I grabbed the rod and clambered over logs, inching forward towards the still water thinking perhaps that I may be able to work my way back to the edge of the splash pool. I could not follow the bank, as the vegetation was too dense. The debris of past floods piled high. I progressed slowly with a fair amount of noise as I crossed over this sandy area. I now noticed that it was criss-crossed with snake, croc, goanna and roo tracks. There was several straight lines of Mussel Shells which were anywhere from 300-1200mm long, all about the same width like shell-paved tracks to no where. I found out later that these were the bowers of the Great Bowerbirds, a predominant species around the campsite. Every log that I had to climb over I jumped, half expecting a million snakes or crocs to slither out from under. I mean, I wasn't exactly dressed for such a sojourn. A pair of Stubbies which exposed my thin unprotected ankles, calves and thighs; a pair of Masseur sandals on my feet. After a couple of half-hearted casts into the still waters and looking around for a clearer path that would lead me to the edge of the splash pool to no avail, I timidly returned to the kayak. I sat on the downed log that the kayak was up-ended over and cast into the main river channel, changing lures several times. Every time I hopped off the log to change position slightly or a lure, I sank up to my knees in the fine mire, struggling to withdraw my feet without losing my sandals in the process.

All I was doing upon reflection was wasting time in order not to have to face the problems of heading back up the river over the cascade. I took a couple of hits, two small hook-ups. Throwback size. I re-righted the kayak; loaded my dried gear into it while it teetered over the edge of the bank, squirmed back into the seat and just leant slightly forward to slide gently into the river water. Like a bloody 'pro!'..... Masterfully.

I made two paddled sorties up to the cascade ledge trying to determine the best line of assault. I paused in the calm area of the splash pool, then began paddling madly. Building up momentum.

I failed miserably three times! My back and shoulders ached.

I looked at both riverbanks, too muddled with vegetation so it seemed for a successful portage. I looked at the shallow white water burbling over the 'stepped ledges'. Too slippery, too uneven, too broken. I could see me slipping over as I tried to breach this line hauling the boat behind. Falling over breaking an ankle and watching in agony as the kayak and its contents drifted slowly away with the current towards Mataranka Falls, my camera strap breaking allowing it to fall into the water...beyond repair, beyond retrieval!

I took a drink of water and had a smoke as I languished at the bottom of the precipice.

Little did I know at the time that the meandering bike trail of yesterday's incident came out onto the southern bank at the lower line of rapids about 300 metres downstream! They were spectacular so it seemed and the track opened up onto a grassy 'knoll' where you could view this vista. All I had to do, so I was told, was to paddle down any-one of those myriad channels which converge to form a large, calm water area above those rapids and beach onto this 'picnic' area. A short walk up the trail would have allowed me to relaunch above these rapids that now blocked my passage!.....

Would you believe it?!

I steeled myself, this time coming at the same section of water flow from a more acute angle, almost under the first smooth tumble of water as it crossed over the ledge. I dug the paddle deep into the water. The bow went up, the hull slewed crazily away from the force of the water. I bellowed 'Rambo-style'. I dug furiously into the water. The paddle skimmed off the surface of the water and rebounded off half submerged rocks, jarring broadside to some. Finding deep water with one stroke, shallow with another, rocks with another, using the paddle as a pole, pushing, lunging, swearing, shouting. I felt the hull breach the top of the smooth water, and then all of a sudden the whole hull was up and over the top and gliding purposefully away from the breach; away from the influence of the flow.

I was knackered.

Exhausted.

Completely stuffed.

Every muscle in agony, my hip in cramp, my lungs screaming, my heart in shock.

I stopped for a smoke, leaning back over the short backrest to try and relieve my back and hips. The deadly analgesic of nicotine and smoke slowing my breath and my raging heart. I couldn't relieve the cramps now in my hip, legs and ankle for there was no room to move my legs especially with the plastic drum of gear between my thighs.

I rested awhile basking in the sun.

The nor'easter was brisk. With my wide upper body (?) acting as a spinnaker I was propelled against the slow current with only minimal effort in paddling on my part.....Providence smiles again....I trolled out the back, snagging twice. I changed to a shallower diver and continued up the river getting one hit, getting a take. It immediately swam into the snags beside the bank. I couldn't budge it. I didn't care so I cut the line...another \$16 lure gone west!

I paddled and glided with the wind to the boat ramp and unloaded the kayak gingerly, tipping it upside down to drain.

Again a lot of water cascaded out.

So too did two rolls of exposed film. Shots that I had taken of this entire adventure, hopefully photographing several of the 'Freshies' that I glided silently close to!

I stiffly strode to the swimming pontoons and fell into the water unable to rotate my shoulders or lift my arms out of the water. I returned the paddle and vest to the Ranger's hut paying \$15 for three hours of enjoyment.....of agony.

I was unimpressed with the Ranger's comments when I described where I had been. He responding that I had only gone about 1½ maybe 2 kays and telling me about the portage point that I could have used. He did comment however, that I had outlasted his expectations by two hours and he had been thinking about what 'reserve price' he should put on my rig!!

I stood under a hot shower for hours it seemed, playing the water over my shoulders and back. I had a beer for tea and was asleep before sunset. I awoke stiff and sore the next morning later than normal with both shoulder blades locked and no strength in my arms. I walked to the river on tired legs with my right ankle objecting fiercely. Dived into the water and attempted to swim. I gave up and went and had another hot shower, slathering Goanna Oil as best I could over my shoulders, lower back and arms before de-camping.

I never did get to Mataranka Falls with its hot and cold running water....

More's the pity as it may have eased my aching muscles quicker...if I could have walked that far which I doubted! I would have stayed to suck up the sun, possibly getting to the falls for therapeutic purposes but the World Cup cricket had started and I wanted to get to Katherine for power and TV coverage.....

But that's another story....

You can 'stick' your paddle power.....

Give me an engine and propeller from here on in.....

Another young boy's dreams shattered!

pcb©

21/5/99

A SUCCESSFUL PHOTO SHOOT

Gun shy, I guess. Like crows.

I suppose you cannot blame them, they have been shot at indiscriminately forever, their carcasses spread-eagled strung up on barbwire fences.

One after the other.

I can remember as a young 'fella' travelling in a car with the family out near Pitttown/Windsor way chasing a barbwire boundary fence festooned with their carcasses, eight or ten that I can remember. Like some hideous outdoors 'trophy display cabinet'. These beautiful, powerful big birds with a wingspan wider than I was tall. The spread exposed their large bodies and powerful muscular legs. Strong beaks stilled, eyes clouded, devoid of the intelligence and alertness of life. Tied by fencing wire to the barbwire strands. Stilled. Lifeless like pinned butterflies under glass. Killed because it was deemed that their very size and presence meant new-borne lambs would be their prey. Maybe yes; maybe no, but that was the price they paid for our intrusion into their hunting grounds. Almost extinct and in many places, still not having recovered their former numbers now that it is illegal to shoot them.

It was not until I had progressed into far northwest Queensland that I again spotted these majestic birds riding high on an updraft, perched on an uppermost limb of a dead tree, or bent over a fresh road kill. A Kangaroo splattered on the road, its 'innards' spewed out with blood and gore about. The eagle pulling, wrenching, tearing skin, meat, and gore with its beak and claws.

On several occasions, I pulled to the verge, grabbed my tripod and camera and stalked back down the road hoping to get a reasonable photograph of one of these birds. To no avail, the 'chicken' had flown the coop so to speak, before I could get within Cooee of its perch. I must have looked quite a 'geek' as I employed more and more stealth and cunning as my unsuccessful 'count' mounted.

Like Peter Sellers in the numerous Pink Panther comedies, I was Inspector Cousteau bumbling along. Sliding from tree trunk to tree trunk, creeping, crawling then standing stock still for all to see as I 'sensed' the bird's readiness to take to the air. Tripod with camera attached slung over my shoulder inching forward towards my quarry.

Luckily, traffic was exceptionally light on those back roads, so that those magnificent, gun-shy birds were the only ones to witness my alarming and psychotic behaviour.

Whilst in Cairns and 'doing' the obligatory touristy trip to Kuranda via the Sky Rail, I participated in an animated conversation with the Proprietress of one of those 'Touristy Stalls'. This one selling stuffed examples of Frill-neck Lizards, Sulphur-crested Cockatoos, Wallabies and one magnificent Wedge-tailed Eagle perched for eternity on a plaster-cast replica of a dead Gum limb. I found it incredible and abhorrent at the same time; that some tourist would actually buy one of them to decorate some room of their home. But then, some people still craved for the erect frozen posture of a Grizzly or Polar Bear, or a Leopard-skin Rug with teeth bared, eyes fixed and glazed; stretched over their Living Room floors.

There is no accounting for some peoples' tastes!

However, thinking back on that poor stuffed example of a Wedge-tailed Eagle, I guess I should have taken a photograph of it on its frozen perch.

It maybe the only 'close-up' that I will ever get of one of these birds if my experiences up to date are any indication.

However, I did not want to give any encouragement to the lovely Proprietress who smiled blandly at my somewhat vocal disagreement at this crass form of commercialism. She was constantly on the defensive under my withering attack. She even admitted to some misgivings on this gruesome trade. In an effort to quell my antagonism and I suppose, to get rid of me quickly, she gave me the name of the Taxidermist and the local Parks and Wildlife Officer who strictly enforced the procurement, the rejuvenation and sale of these monstrosities. Stating that all 'specimens' had died a natural death and were either pets, private zoo exhibits or carefully reconstructed maimed, injured or accidentally slain animals of the wild. From what I had seen of the remains of these birds after they became the victims of roadkill, the reformation to 'stuffed' perfection was nothing short of miraculous!

The Taxidermist deserved a Knighthood for services rendered. My sarcasm seemed to fall on deaf ears!

I was out of Burke and Wills Roadhouse heading north towards Normanton, chortling along doing my customary 80 kph. As I entered into a slow left-hand bend, I spied two full sized Eagles feasting on a recent roadkill down in the storm ditch beside the road.

They both took flight simultaneously as I drove towards them.

We were all heading in the same direction. As I negotiated further into the curve, the smaller of the two veered at the last moment. Perhaps it had more air speed, free air and lift, but it still clipped its wing on the leading left-hand edge of the van. The other had veered earlier but had not gained sufficient height or speed to entirely avoid me. For what seemed like minutes, it flew with me, its body stretched out between my front UHF aerial and the radio antennae. Its wing stretched across the width of the windscreen. Every wing feather, leading and trailing edge and wingtip feathers were working. Spreading, feathering, beating, and up beating on every slow motion beat of the wing. Fighting laboriously for air like some lumbering 747 at 'stall speed', straining to gain height and speed. Each downward reach of its wing magnified or so it seemed with the frantic work of feather and wing to find 'air'.

Beautiful, absolutely beautiful...superb!

More concerned about the sheer magnificence of the Eagle and its close proximity than my own safety, or the possible repercussions of evasive action, I veered frantically to the right away from the left-hand camber of the curve. This would have been disastrous enough on the normal narrow, one lane black top of the Development Road with its half-lane either side of red gravel and dirt. However, at this point the verge gave way to an alarmingly steep bank into the ubiquitous storm ditch, about 2 metres below the level of the 'track'. This evasive action all the more dangerous with the caravan in tow!

I was more concerned though, with the safety of the bird.

However, with all my endeavours to veer away, the bird seemed drawn to the same path as though an invisible wire was slung between my two aerials passing through its body, pinning it in this position!

By the time I fully understood the predicament into which I was rapidly entering, the bird had fought for sufficient speed and veered away to my left. I have no idea how I didn't plunge over into the storm ditch or in wrenching the wheel back into the curve, causing the van to 'fishtail' and

slither down the slope forcing the truck to follow suit!

I was, upon reflection, dead lucky or Providence had smiled on me thinking me worthy of another chance because I had been more concerned with the bird's safety than mine.....I crawled to the exit of the curve trembling and pulled off the road at the first opportunity to regain my composure by making myself a cup of coffee. Hoping beyond hope that out of some sort of 'bird-like gratitude', they would settle again onto the gore of the road kill so that I could get that longed for 'close-up' shot of them.

But they did not return...not at least for the half hour or so that I sat there sipping my coffee while I was still trembling with the adrenalin coursing through me!

Perhaps they too, had retired to some secluded perch to sip on a cup of coffee and to pull on a cigarette to regain their composure. They too reflecting that they had just had a very close call!

A week later whilst travelling between the Burke and Wills and Gregory Downs Roadhouses on a secluded, isolated section of elevated "floodway" (which was a true misnomer but was often traversed in central far north-west Queensland), a beautiful, huge Wedge-tail was feasting on the body and entrails of a recent road kill. It took wing on my approach. As soon as the elevated section of roadway allowed me to pull onto a level wide verge, I parked the rig about 700 metres away from the bloody mess in the middle of the road. Even at that distance the blood and gore glistened in the early sun, the carcass splattered across the road. The eagle had returned settling onto the carcass but took to the air again as a car approached.

As I grabbed my tripod and camera it had wheeled around and with a flurry of enormous wings and stretched, clutching talons again had settled over the oozing cadaver. There were no trees that I could 'slink' behind, no obstacles that I could use as cover so pretending to do my version of 'creeping up on the enemy' I crouched and trotted toward the 'foe', M16 held loosely, finger on the trigger...sorry...I walked slowly towards the mess in the middle of the road observable for miles around!

The giant bird laboriously climbed into the clear blue sky.

I must have looked quite a sight; a game of Charades perhaps! One minute emulating the combative running slouch of an alert attacking soldier...the 'tip-toeing' of a Peeping Tom searching for that lighted window and after the bird again took flight, the nonchalant amble of a 'Sunday Stroller', the 'stop-start inquisitiveness' of the flower sniffer trying to give the Eagle the impression that I cared nought for him.

Surprisingly the great bird quickly attained its 'soar and search' altitude becoming just a speck in the bright blue cloudless sky. Circling on high altitude eddies it soared in larger and larger orbits. But I thought the redness, the freshness of the road kill would lure it again to the bounty. I noticed a formed 'box culvert' going under the road some 20 metres away from the scrambled body. I skidded down the red dirt shoulder into the entrance of the 'tunnel'. Standing up I was at eye level to the surface of the roadway. I set up the camera on the tripod and attached the cable release. I focused in with my 200 mm zoom lens onto the mash of flesh.

It would be a beautiful shot once the bird returned to feast I mused.

I settled back in the dampness of the formed concrete box channel lighting a cigarette resigned to the fact that some time may pass before I achieved my 'Holy Grail'.

Like a 'Jack in the Box' or one of those pop-up 'silhouettes' in a Shooting Gallery I occasionally bobbed my head up to check whether my quarry had returned. Sometimes spying it through the dark 'window cut-out' that was the end of the formed box culvert as the bird continued to lazily circle high in the sky. There was nothing to do except an occasional 'bob', a drag on a smoke and wait as if in ambush. The culvert was clear at both ends as it protruded past the slope of the 'drop-off' of the road but was quite dark in its middle sections. Because it was only about 1200 mm high I was slouched, half lying on the cold dampness of the concrete floor. After about half an hour, the internal air of the culvert had got quite hazy from cigarette smoke. The bird had not yet returned; I don't know why! There had been no further traffic on the road above so perhaps it was the billowing smoke that must have been emanating from both ends of the culvert....I had entered into somewhat of a daydream state when I was startled from my reverie by a rustle, a slithering sound coming from further in the culvert. I figured it must be quite close by because the sound had been quite loud....and on my deaf side!

I did not wait to look around to investigate the source of the noise. I rolled out grabbing the tripod and camera as I went.

The Eagle was struggling into the air, startled by my sudden movement!

I'd missed the 'shot' of a lifetime....perched, eating, tearing and taking wing...all would have been in full frame. Dejected...humiliated...angry...

wondering what the heck was the thing that had done the slithering, I clambered back up onto the road. Looking both ways there was no traffic in sight so I set up the tripod, I changed to the smaller 35 mm lens and took 3 beautiful shots...of mangled body, exposed broken rib, white leg bone and hip, the bloody sheen of muscle and tendon, torn stomach, congealing blood, entrails, bloody flesh, squashed head and oozing brain matter, flies swarming.....

After all, after more than 2 hours of stealth, cunning and guile I had to take a photo of something...even if it wasn't that enthralling...

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06/06/99

THE LILTING REFRAIN

There is madness at the bottom of the garden....

A case of insanity bought on by travelling alone for so long....

By one-self for too long....

A case of going ‘troppo’ which is said can happen whilst travelling in this part of the country during the ‘build up’ for the ‘wet’....I can remember now that I have heard it before....this lilting refrain.

A soft orchestral arrangement heavily biased with strings or a ‘Moog’ synthesizer perhaps?

Eerie....

I remember getting up one night to walk unsteadily outside around the van in the blackness and stillness of the night that only the bush can provide. I can now recall doing this encirclement on several occasions during the course of my travels. Trying to detect the origins of this music and from which direction it emanated from.

It was soft and mysterious and with my deficiency in directional hearing, seemed to come from all directions. Rolling, going up and down the scales but in an eerie, somewhat soothing manner. Finishing on a drawn out note while underneath, in counterpoint, the rolling, massaging tune began again. Repetitive, but not all the time. Varying slightly at times or coming together simultaneously every once in a while. Usually, eventually returning to the melodious lilt which ended on the drawn out ‘up’ note while commencing again, under-pointed, before the ‘up note’ slides away.

Getting up to emerge from the van, walking around it. Trying to get a ‘fix’ on its point of origin without success. Putting it down to my lousy hearing and to the total lack of directional hearing...again!

Forgetting about it until the next time....

Thinking about it now, I’ve heard this lilt on more than a few occasions during my travels, even at one stage blaming my tinnitus, frustrated to discover another tonal variation emanating from within my head. There are many and one more should not cause sleepless nights!

But the list includes:-

- a jet plane scream coming closer than drifting away,
- the continuous metallic beep of a heart monitor machine signifying the death of the ‘hooked up’ patient, an occasional Bellbird call...a crisp clear bell tone three or four times in a row,
- the single crisp stroke of a tiny triangle,
- a thrum, a low monotone of endless rising and falling modulation like the lazy swell and ebb of the ocean close to the shore,
- the sound of a thousand Crickets, the individual night song lost in the sheer numbers screeching to a crescendo. Then being ‘cut off’ suddenly much in the same manner as the Beatles manufactured, sudden recorded cessation in the Sgt. Peppers track of “A Day in a Life”...I think that was it,
- the roar of an electric train as it rushes between Town Hall and Wynyard through the city network tunnel,
- the sweet power of a propeller driven plane at maximum revs just before take off or just before the blade is feathered altering the pitch, the sound,
- the penetrating pulsating thrum of bass from either a submarine under way or from a gigantic intergalactic starship (beam me down Scottie style),

- the over-dubbing of the metallic, high-pitched beep mentioned above with a slight tonal extension with a ‘cut in/cut out’ of a still higher metallic buzz above those two,
- an occasional grinding sound like bone on bone,
- an occasional ‘watery’ tone especially when I turn my head shaking it side to side. This is usually followed by a ‘wetness’, a sensation like that in my left ear,
- an occasional ‘coolness’ sensation but strangely one that you can hear,
- sometimes a ‘deadness’, a ‘heaviness’, a pressure feeling as though something is pressing against the left side of my head....

No wonder I am hard of hearing with all these noises drowning out any external noises of substance.....it is truly amazing that I am not stark, staring raving mad from this constant cacophony emanating from within.

And now this eerie, melodic, almost ghostly, spectral...no...almost romantic, euphoric, esoteric, mournful....a tune strung together. Made up of 6-10 different notes in a structured, composed manner. Quite beautiful in a way, emanating from within my head, overplaying the sharpness, the sometimes painful spasms of my other “inside head” noises.

I heard it again last night, the first time for some time if I recall correctly while not a sound could be heard from outside the van. I was lying in bed determined to finish this book; a good book, not great on structure, not great on grammatical finesse.

But a ripping good yarn.

I’d promised myself some time ago after several ‘all night’ affairs with a ‘can’t put the bloody book down’ episodes that that would never happen again. There was always to-morrow and to-morrow looked far better through properly rested eyes or with just being awake!

But I finished the book in the wee small hours of the night and I was lying listening to the silence when that tune crept into my consciousness...again.

I got up, put on a pair of ‘skids’, walked around the outside of the van, looked at the star-filled sky, the cloudiness sharp within the Milky Way. Clear sparkles of a zillion tiny ‘fire flies’ danced and twinkled to the horizon. The umbrella of night virtually alive; alight. Full of light points; pin points of light. It was chilly standing in only my ‘skids’, cloaked in the miracle that is the Universe.

Standing in awe until my neck muscles signified their dissent at my uplifted head stance and goose bumps popped out all over my body...to enjoy the same sight I supposed.

But the eerie tune was not now discernible...

I stepped back into the van shivering to again lay on my bed after shucking off my ‘skids’. Three days worth of wear; right side out, inside out and then ‘cured/dried’ right side out again!

The mournful, nay romantic tune returned.

I was chilly...I turned off the small oscillating electric fan. The refrain slowed like a 12” record being changed from 45 to 33 rpm....then slowed to silence....

The fan....the bloody fan!

I turned the fan back on.

It picked up speed and began its lazy oscillations.

I moved the fan to the other side of the van. No refrain. I returned it to its original position but rotated the base slightly away from its central location, which pointed directly at the centre of my bed. No tune. I placed it on top of the stove further away from the bed. No tune. I re-positioned it back to its original position....the eerie conformity of the tune returned. I raised my arm and laid diagonally across the bed. The tune continued but with a slight variation to notes and pitch.

The resonance, wind resistance, blade movement, speed of oscillation, air movement through the safety grille, wind and back pressure must be conducive with the physical shapes and 'cut-outs' around my bed when the fan is placed in that exact location to produce, to compose that orchestral masterpiece...that opus...that aria, that beautiful, eerie, dreamy piece.

I drifted off to sleep, the tune a beautiful counterpoint to the cacophony from within my head.....I was happy.

I awoke as I normally have done as I've travelled, with the sky still black with night stealing itself towards the morning light. Listening for the first stutters of greeting from the early birds which slowly built to the chortles, screeches, whistles and song from the trees around me.

My bladder screaming for relief.

At that time of the morning, my 'inside the head' cacophony is at its lowest ebb and I was laying there thinking of my plans for the day. I wanted to 'do' the Ranger Discovery tour, a walk around the yellowcake of the Uranium mine; to venture to Ubirr and the Border Store; place a placard of clever words at the entrance to the Jabiluka Uranium Mine entrance gate; and venture 'off-road' again. To bush camp away from the regimented alignment of the 'Stray Greys' and their 'adventures' on the unending bituminous 'strip'.

I'd come begrudgingly into Jabiru and its organised, high priced Caravan Park specifically to restock with supplies, wipe the dust from out of the van, wash the sheets giving them their first consideration for at least five weeks and to make contact with the outside world. Nothing else. I ended up washing the van, draining away the evidence of dusty, rutted roads that the 'adventurous greys' would shudder at and refuse point blank to negotiate.

The dust my 'macho' proof of the 'unbituminised' travels.

But the truck I was determined to leave as a dust laden relic, the build up inside becoming nauseating, the distinct red tinge of the black duco beginning to cake on. But it was my 'badge'...my rite of travel, or so it seemed to my eyes. Sitting amongst the glare of shiny duco elsewhere in the park. The 'anti-snob' in me shying away from the crisp, clean lines of spotless vans and towing vehicles as I motored down the road. "Another grey in his macho off-road rig frightened to get it dirty" whizzing around in my head as I sat choking to death from the clouds of dust swirling around the cabin of my truck as I motored dirtily along, never wanting to be categorised with the 'clean machines'!

And suffering continuously the price of my stubbornness.

The simple logic of it!

Or was it more ego?

Not wanting to be graded in the same class as the “Gallopings Greys” who would go into spasms of fright and have heart palpitations at the mere thought of taking their beloved shining vehicle and caravan down a dusty, bumpy dirt track or road!

I was lying there in bed with all these thoughts going around in my head enjoying also the first smoke of the day and the individual calls of the morning birds gaining confidence from the warming sun when the soft, lilting refrain began anew.

I sat upright with a start...the fan wasn't on!

The flow and ebb of my tinnitus bending, swarming, drifting like mist on a lake disturbed by the early morning breeze. My 'inside head' noises going around and over the now familiar pattern of notes. The refrain synthesised, going in and out, softly pulsating as the volume increased then faded away.

My small, bloody oscillating fan wasn't on....!!!!!!

I bet I'm the only person in the world whose tinnitus has the capability of 'record and playback' mode!!!!

pcb©

12/7/99

Ahh....ya gotta laugh at yaself...

DOING KAKADU

I was hoping to get away early just as the sun was coming up, lighting the mist laying over the Billabong. I had been illegally bush camped on the banks of a serene billabong...not necessarily far enough from the water's edge that is recommended to alleviate sudden croc attacks. But the Rangers had eventually found me and 'asked' that I decamp to the recognised and formed bushcamping area about 3 kays back up the 'goat track'. Overnight fees were \$5 which was collected by a couple who lived on-site in a converted bus which they drove from Kiama every year. There was an excellent Amenities Block with hot and cold water and showers and chemical

toilets and a formed gas BBQ area with 'roofed' table settings. I ended up staying there for 7 nights as it was centrally located to a large number of the 'must see' points of Kakadu and besides, both the Rangers and the couple from Kiama turned out to be beaut people. The Rangers especially told me about several 'sights' that are not listed on the "Information Pamphlet" and I was extremely thankful that I had the chance to see them.

The Outlier stood majestically behind the billabong. Lotus Blossoms pierced the thin, soft sheet of grey mist that veneered the calm waters of the billabong. The craggy surfaces of the Aboriginal sacred Outlier that was Nourlangie were sunlit, throwing off bright earthy colours and shading the deep clefts in the vertical high cliff line.

I didn't make that early morning sojourn for photographs that may have captured the moment, the mystique, the 'feel' and the age of that rock and its base wetting billabong.

He was one of those people who you instantly have a dislike for the moment that you see him. He came towards me. Rotund, not old, mid forties perhaps. Nose to the air as though he was an inquisitive dog testing the air around me. Chin out, chest and stomach out, bum out. Arms bent swinging arrogantly beside his body, strutting towards me. No....more an arrogant swagger. A smug roll of the body as though his forward progress was the only thing stopping him from falling over backwards if he stood still. All the protuberance of his body sticking up...or out. His missus sitting in the sparkling clean car which was parked in front of an identical one in all regards. From SA. An older form of the same figure standing between the two cars, feet apart with arms crossed over his chest in interrogation mode. Dressed in exactly the same coloured shorts and T-shirt, same rakish angle of a Baseball Cap sitting acutely on his head as that of the figure advancing towards me. He stopped abruptly in front of me, feet apart with arms crossed over his chest, his stomach the only individualism that he showed from that of the older figure still standing between the two cars.

"Mornin'...where ya bin? Ya car looks as though it's seen some dusty roads."

It's one of the reasons that I keep it dirty so that I'm not categorised with this twit!

"Yeah...G'day.....well....I gotta nasty habit....I see a track going off the bitumen, I've gotta go down it. It's the only way you often see parts of Kakadu that most people would rarely see. Sometimes they go some-where, more than not they don't, just fizzle out or have some sign saying 'No Authorised Access'."

We both chuckled.

He was about my height, his head as round as his body. Small eyes that his smile never reached, never giving them a glint or a life of their own. He started rambling on as though he expected that I would be impressed about where they had been. "Stayed at the 'Croc Hotel' at Jabiru last night, doing the Yellow Water's tour this arvo. Staying at Coinda to night, then home. We just called into Nourlangie for a 'squiz', thought we'd call into here for a quick cuppa....it's bitumen from the highway."

I glanced at my watch. At this time of the morning it must have been a bloody quick 'squiz', I thought to myself.

"Have you been to Nourlangie yet?" he asked, almost in a manner hoping that I hadn't.

One-up-manship, black dog syndrome, or at least that was my impression.

“No...” I glanced at the sky, by now the sun was starting to climb higher into the sky. “I was hoping to get there early...for the early morning light... you know?”

I’d lost him.

“Wonderful!” He exclaimed.

“There was some walks we’d like to have done but we don’t have the time...pity. But like you, we saw this turn-off and thought we’d have a ‘squizz’...you know...see what was down here, have a cuppa....bin on the Cruise?” The road into here was bitumen with nothing here but the Bush Camping Area and a small Billabong. I mean, I liked it here, but he didn’t seem to see anything special about it....but gee.... ‘he was adventurous’, I thought sarcastically. I nodded to his question on the Cruise, knowing that he really didn’t want my impression. I really didn’t think that it was worth the money asked but what the hell, you are here, so you might as well do it! I may be a little hard on this ‘Touristy thing’ as it was the end of the “Wet” with plenty of water about and all the Billabongs full. This caused the bird life to disperse to the four corners of the Park. I’d been told that the end of the “Dry” was the best time to do this cruise as the water had gone down substantially causing these huge wetlands to become a series of inter-connected water-holes with the bird life condensed into and onto the available water courses. Also, by then it is the end of the nesting period with the chicks adding to the over-all bird population. The unfortunate down side of visiting this area at the end of the “Dry” was that the majority of river courses and waterfalls were then not running.

“Wonderful is it? Just what Kakadu’s all about....splendid!”

I really didn’t think that that was what Kakadu was all about, but I wasn’t about to disappoint him by disagreeing with him. There were other places that you could go to for nothing that gave you a better understanding of what the Park was all about. Instead I asked, “Have you been to Ubirr?” I was actually wondering what the road was like. I’d been told that it was blacktop all the way except for the last kilometre or so where they were told that the road was still under repair after it was swept away during the ‘wet’.

“Nah...not enough time...we have to be back in Adelaide for the week-end.”

“Oh, that’s a pity...!” I felt smugness coming on. “Too bad, you’ll miss some of the nicest spots...what Kakadu is all about! Like Gunlom, Waterfall Creek, Yurmikmik, Motorcar Falls, Barramundi Falls, Jim Jim and Twin Falls, 4 Mile and 10 Mile Holes, Mamakula...but then it’s taken me just on 2 weeks so far. I guess I should do it all inside 3-4 weeks before I head out...I guess I’m lucky though that I haven’t got such a rushed time-table as some....and you definitely need a 4WD to get into most of those areas”....

That should fix the smug bastard.

He more than likely was thinking the same of me!

But fancy doing close on a 7000 kilometres round trip in one week over and through some of the most desolate and long distance hauls between towns in Australia just to go on an one hour cruise, that’s really not worth going on at this time of the year so you can boast that ‘you’ve done Kakadu’.

“Well, best be going...you enjoy yourself...it sure is a beautiful part of the country.”

He strutted off, the ambling roll more pronounced from the rear. He joined his older ‘like image’,

standing 'mirror reflection' in front of him as he reported back.....on the smug little bastard with his macho 4WD and van I supposed. But I was miffed, angry even at having wasted my time on the sod. Not really learning why he had approached me in the first place. Perhaps it was my unfriendly stance that threw him off.

But where do these people come from?

I shook my head and put my camera gear into the truck, going back to lock up the van. An old bloke ambled over. He was from down further closer to the small but neat Amenities block.

Prostate I guess.

Dual axle Evernew, white Landcruiser on LPG, NSW plates.

Nice rig actually.

"Good morning". I was surprised that it still was. Articulate, educated voice. "I understand that you went to Jim Jim yesterday, yes?"

Apparently, this was considered quite a feat according to the Rangers. I had informed them yesterday morning on my proposed itinerary for the day. They'd told me about only one in ten were getting through, most giving up and turning back within the first 5 kays. Even the Rangers were complaining about the condition of the road. 50 kays of solid, large corrugations about 100-150mm high, wheel diameter length crest to crest. The last kays worse than a goat track through deep fine sand, sand drifts, over washouts and creek beds with the track continuously turning back on itself with switchbacks and hairpins. In some places the track appeared to disappear and the wheel ruts of previous adventurers seemed to criss-cross all over the place. Apparently the road and track had not had any attention since the end of the 'wet' and had been severely damaged during the good 'wet' that had just finished. Even the intrepid 4WD Troopie Backpacker Tour Operators were threatening to delete the JimJim and Twin Falls itinerary from their schedules, which would be a pity as these two are arguably the most spectacular falls in the park.

The Rangers apparently were impressed with my feat of making it through and had informed several people of the fact. At the local "Nature Slide Show" that was put on by the Rangers the previous night, two intending travellers of the "track" had approached me for my recollections on the odyssey. (They informed me that night that they all had turned back after going less than ½ kilometre, too afraid to continue!)

The old bloke was wiry, stooped with a long thin nose; wisps of white hair floating like a halo above his head in the whiff of a breeze. Skinny legs, knobbly knees almost covered by long socks and wearing open sandals. A model of 'chic'! As I said, an old bloke!

"G'day...you the bloke in the Evernew? NSW plates? LPG on your Landcruiser? What's your consumption like?"

Then ensued a long and meandering monologue on his previous vehicle (a Statesman), which was also on gas and which his daughter now drives, the exact number of miles it took to pay off the conversion costs, its economy before and after the conversion with and without the van behind. Ditto the Landcruiser, \$/Klms, \$/100 kays, gallons/litres per 100 kays, kays per tank of gas/petrol, and whether the \$1800 conversion cost was really worth it when you consider the costs of LPG versus petrol in this part of the country. In his opinion the price disparity not warranting the hassles of the conversion.

A doddering old bugger, but all this off the top of his head!

And things I wanted to hear....and in such detail!!!!

“You thinking of going?” I asked, trying to stop the flow or at least slow down the ‘computer spit’ of technical and economic data. Why I’d asked the question in the first place I’ll never know! Trying to find a common thread of interest I supposed. But the day was getting on, the sun climbing still higher in the sky; the mists so evident first thing in the morning having long ago dissipated. The heat shimmer bleaching away the colours of a fine morning.

His thought patterns appeared to be addled causing him to look around in order to re-adjust his thoughts in another direction. “Well...yes?” He stammered. “The Rangers informed me that you negotiated the road yesterday. It’s just that we started to go into Gunlom the other day. The dashboard started to shake about alarmingly. We stopped about 3 kays in to check the van. There was a lot of dust, things having fallen out of the top cupboards with some crockery and glassware being broken. I’ve even heard people having their micro-wave and top cupboards coming loose trying to get in there!”

“What...into Jim Jim?”

I looked startled. No one in their right mind would take a van into/onto those 60 kays of horror road. If they and their van survived the corrugations, they couldn’t possibly negotiate the last 10 kays of switchbacks, hairpins, sand and washouts.

He appeared flustered.

“No...” he replied nonplussed, “Into Gunlom”.

“Oh...” I answered. “Well...I got into there OK. A bloke and his missus from the ACT got in there OK with their Commodore and small Jayco.....they did it OK...I stayed there for 4 days...beautiful spot!”

“Oh no...we couldn’t go on....not with the rattles and the dashboard shaking about so much.”

“Well....I think they’re design that way...4WDs I mean...to move about a bit independent of the shell...to answer your original question...where are you from by the way?”

Bloody hell, what did I do that for? I’m a glutton for punishment. The morning was wearing on, the sun almost at its zenith; the light now too bright to get reasonable shots.

“Thirroul...” Was his reply.

“Lovely spot...I’m from Terrigal...God’s country.”

“Yes it is...we have a Summer House at Copacabana”. Sounding as though he lived in the snowfields, or worse, Tasmania...immigrating to the Central Coast for the ‘colder months’.

“Yes...well...to draw an analogy...by comparison,” I continued. “The road into Gunlom is a 4 lane, smooth as silk expressway compared to Jim Jim. If you are not prepared to get up on top of the corrugations which are 10 times deeper, 10 times wider, longer and go for a solid 50 kays....you have to hit them at 70-90 kph to keep on top of them. You’ll jump around a fair bit, drift across the

road through no fault of your own, drift into and out of corners...even in 4WD. You'll hear rattles, you'll see things move that you never thought would move...I lost my CB console, both CBs came loose, my internal rear view mirror, my outside mirror, one driving light and one of the aerials came loose...I had to stop about midway to re-fix them...but the gorge and falls are breath-taking. Once you get there, to Jim Jim car-park I mean, you have to clamber, climb, and descend over boulders as big as a house for about 1½ kays. You dive into the splash pool...it is freezing...I have never swum in colder water that didn't have ice over its surface...but it is awe-inspiring! To get to Twin Falls you have to negotiate a river crossing where the water was almost bonnet deep, drive for several miles along a sandy goat track that in several places has been washed out with deep rutted creek crossings...you then have to swim up the river for several hundred metres...I used an inflatable mattress but unfortunately I didn't take my camera gear as I didn't have a waterproof container....but that was beautiful too although the falls weren't running that much...but it was worth the trouble!"

"Yes...well....thanks for that...I don't think we should attempt the drive as both my wife and I could not climb over the rocks to get to the falls...and we definitely wouldn't be going swimming....the warm waters of Mataranka Springs are more to our liking..."

He smiled at his own joke displaying a surprisingly animated face. It was as though there were two distinct faces; both at some stage masked which was adroitly removed depending on the reaction required.

"Bye for now."

He turned and ambled back in the direction of his van, the stoop seemingly more pronounced than before.

I was almost 3 hours overdue for my intended photo-shoot of Nourlangie Rock. The sun was high, glaring and hot. The bright blue of the early morning sky now burnt out to a bland, washed out colour, lacking character and definition. The light was all wrong. I decided still to go, resigned to the fact that moody, mystical shots capturing the early morning ambience would not now be achieved.

As though my professional integrity and reputation would depend on it!!!

pcb

08/07/99

WITH MILITARY PRECISION

In all my travels I have had only three ant invasions into the van. Once they have intruded and worse, established a nest, they are an absolute cow to get rid of!

It has got to the point now where the timber blocks I use as “sole plates” for the stabilizer legs of the van are saturated with Insect Surface spray.

I’ve had little, medium and large black ants; little, medium and large red ants all at some stage invading the van or conducting search probes over the van’s surfaces. You’ll always get the occasional stray wandering through so to speak, but a quick squash of the thumb seem to deter those meanderings.

Some people sprinkle talcum powder around the lowered legs of the van. It seems to work well but little circles of white talc around the wheels and legs don’t at all seem to be macho. As I said I’ve tended to use surface spray as I think the talc is affected by high winds.

But amazingly, they still seem to wander in!

At Katherine, knowing I’d be there for some time confident that the Aussies would do well in the World Cup, I elevated the van onto the heavy duty jack stands to give the tyres and suspension a rest. The old girl needed a break. But the ants were thick on the ground around the place. Kerrie and John (the permanents next door) gave me some ant powder that worked well and saved me the weekly spraying habit.

I bought some.

Expensive stuff, with some alarming warnings written on the pack. Deadly shit. This then worried me. Especially the effects it may have on the local bird life, or more precisely on the grubs, worms and insects that swarmed around the van. The local birdlife loved those morsels.

The most stubborn of ants are the Green Tree variety. About the size of a Bull Ant.

You could be wandering through the bush, brush against a tree or shrub that they may be on and you would have 30-40 drop immediately onto you. Apparently they deposit a secretion onto the skin which causes an immediate reaction. But they do bite. The little buggers hang on. They almost seem to bury minutely into the skin then hang on so furiously that they contort their bodies with the effort, doubling over as they strain. The bite is less than a needle prick and is secondary to the burning sensation of the reaction to the secretion.

I have come across them regularly from the central Tropical Coast of QLD to the tropical north of Northern Territory. Up around here they seem to be in plague proportions.

They build their nests in large leafed trees bending the leaves together and stitching them up to resemble a large cocoon. These nests can be quite large. I’ve seen them as large as a 2 litre Orange or milk container.

When camping you always try to “pitch” under substantial trees for the shade they offer against the hot tropical sun. But you always keep an eye out for those large nests suspended in the foliage. You never get close to a tree so decorated and no matter what, you never allow tree branches or drooping leaves to come into contact with any part of the van.

I have been most careful about that!

At Muirella Park, which is a NPWS camp ground in Kakadu, I was camped close up to but not touching a small grove of trees that provided shade from both the rising and setting sun. Several trees in this small grove had the telltale cocoon dangling amidst the foliage. It wasn’t until I’d been

there for the sixth day that I noticed a Green Ant trail along the top “bracing” member of the extended awning and along my temporary washing line strung under the awning.

I walked slowly around the van, checking around the wheels and legs for the conspicuous ant trail.

None!!

I gingerly climbed up onto the spare wheel bolted to the rear bull bar of the van to peer over the edge of the roofline like “Foo and his nose being there”. A gentle breeze was blowing. A slender branch swayed to and fro. Its small crown of leaves brushing softly against the roof. On those occasions when the leafs briefly caressed the roofline there was a mad scramble of ants waiting to leap up onto or off the swaying crown. There was a ring of ants around the “brush” line perfectly aligned in a circle. The front halves of their bodies swaying, standing erect, waiting for the moment of departure by climbing up onto the passing leaves. Several of the leaves were covered in ants awaiting their opportunity to leap onto the roof.

I must have looked a right git perched on the spare wheel on tiptoe, hanging on by my fingers, my nose protruding over the edge of the roof, my eyes looking down the surface area of the roofline. Continuing this precarious stance for about $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour I suppose. Watching the military precision with which these bloody ants had figured out how to gain access to my van. I followed the procession of ants from their nest over limbs, twigs and foliage, onto and over neighbouring trees and branches. An aerial highway that descended via a tenuous and momentary association with the roof of my van.

I wondered what the attraction was that impelled this behaviour.

It brought back memories of my childhood penchant for the observation and conservation of those little black ants around home. As a boy lying for hours watching their frantic searchings and forays. Never allowing any one to walk on the pathway in case they should squash those precious specimens!

But these guys displayed an organizational skill, a strategy, planning, forward thinking and intelligence that those hurrying antics of little black ants of long ago never realized. But for their entire endeavour they never entered the van although the occasional reconnoitre was evident by the trail on the washing line. Time may prove that hypothesis incorrect. They appeared to be feasting on the resin droppings, nectar deposits and gum splattered over the roof of the van.

Nature’s indices of my travels.

After a fairly lengthy observation period I snapped off the errant twig and crown of leaves. There was an immediate flurry of activity further up the branch with ants passing up from its now amputated tip, communicating by touch each descending ant advancing to the “drop off zone”. Confusion reigned. The circular pattern of expectant ants on the roof of the van at the ‘drop-off’ zone remained for some time. Possibly not comprehending that their line of departure had been severed and was not just momentarily absent by a wind gust. After about 5 minutes they must have ‘twigged’ (clever pun intended) to their plight as one or two broke from the circular pattern and began touching each and every ant still half raised on rear legs, front legs extended, still awaiting that errant foliage.

As if as one, they all scattered as though an “attack whistle” had sounded. Mayhem broke out with all of them running around the flat roof area in an apparent uncoordinated pattern.

Time was getting on. I wanted to have a shower, fire up the barby and wait till the flames died to glowing embers and cook and have tea before sunset; before the swarms of mosquitoes descended.

Coming back from my shower the sun was at a low angle highlighting the edge of the van roof where the awning vinyl attached. Silhouetted against the setting sun were bright blobs of gold evenly spaced along the entire edge of the roofline as though positioned by some Master Jeweller. Golden droplets set regimentally around the crown of a tiara. In perfect line, the ants glowed, peering over the abyss, antennae waving, all facing down towards the expanse of vinyl of the awning. In a perfect, coordinated line. All facing in that direction; all equidistance apart.

Like a line of soldiers on parade, standing at ease.

Three or four ants were rushing along behind the line making contact with each and every ant thus aligned. Like burly sergeants inspecting the line of troops, barking orders, instilling confidence? Instructing the troop on the expected level of conduct during the coming charge. The “over the top” attack.

In the orange glow of the sun they looked like drops of honey neatly and equally aligned along the entire length of roof. There was no activity on the cropped branch of the neighbouring tree. It was completely free of any ant activity as though they had discovered the futility of any presence there.

Again as if on cue like a whistle sounding propelling men over the parapet into no-man’s land, about 10-12 ants would break the line and begin to scamper down the vinyl incline.

I shook the awning from underneath. Those adventurous few would bounce down the incline to fall to the ground below. Activity stopped on the line above. The whistle would sound. They got together in a swarming, touching mass.

To talk tactics no doubt.

Then they reformed into that perfectly spaced line peering again over that abyss.

Then another forward scouting expedition would be ordered to advance down the incline with the same result. Another closing of ranks. Another strategy meeting. Another forming up at the parapet. Another scouting raid.

This happened 4 or 5 times. Maybe even 6! Until only an errant few remained. I wondered whether they were the ones who had been giving all the orders, displaying all the organizational skills. I could only surmise because I couldn’t see their stripes! As if they realized that the remaining body of ants was insufficient to form a strategic defensive line, it looked as though their anxieties overcame their military training and they broke ranks as one, scurrying in retreat almost. Commencing a panic stricken, leaderless rout across the flat expanse of roof.

Perhaps the sacrificial few.

I swiped most of them off with a broom

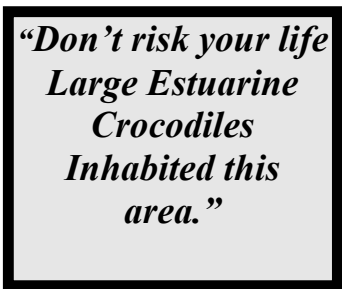
I had tea in the dark being attacked by a swarm of mossies.

Insect revenge perhaps?

10/7/99

IT'S REALLY NOT WORTH IT!

I mean, you'd see a disturbance in the water; a croc more than likely. Every dirt road or track you wandered down that happened to meet, cross or shadow a creek, billabong, wetland area or river had a prominent sign next to it:



***“Don’t risk your life
Large Estuarine
Crocodiles
Inhabited this
area.”***

Even if you were miles from no-where there'd still be that sign! Beside some promising looking hole, banks shaded by overhanging foliage, submerged logs and snags. Prime fishing areas.

The experience at Borroloola where the causeway afforded a view down the river and where you could see crocs lazing on the banks or laying almost submerged in the middle of the river; at the boat ramp where crocs swam idly about and where the Abs light-heartedly 'called in' the crocs didn't deter my desire to fish...well...just in those areas maybe! But I'd be tootling along and drive over some bridge over a small creek that I'd thought maybe worth a 'go'. I'd park the rig, swing down beside the ubiquitous, ever present warning sign to cast or spin for a couple of minutes into the dark, murky, muddy, slow moving or still waters.

My version of the “stop, revive, survive” pit stop even if I'd only done a couple of miles for the day, which was more than likely the case. (After all, my interpretation of a 'good day's drive' was not to exceed 100-150 kays for that day. Usually it was a darn sight less. It was an extreme situation where that distance was exceeded for the day!) Ironic...eh?

A few casts, a smoke, an apple, some water...30 minutes no more, before I headed back onto the bitumen.

If I caught something, all the better. It was more than likely a 'throw-back' in any case, ensuring that my 'Catch and Release' philosophy was not compromised.

I will admit though, a certain blasé attitude towards crocs.

The stories you hear seem to engender mysteriousness, an animal cunning, and an intelligence of these prehistoric beasts when they have a brain smaller than your little finger! I do have a healthy regard for their hunting skills, their ambush techniques and their ability to 'take' large Barra who themselves, have a surprising turn of speed and guile of their own. Also my forays are tempered or limited by my acceptance of my own limitations, eg; my lack of hearing, of my complete lack of directional definition, my slowness in re-action times, my inability to turn and run fast especially over pitted surfaces, log strewn or rocky ground and my failing eye-sight.

All symptoms of an aging body, no doubt!

While in Kakadu for 15 days, I spent 13 of those in "Bush Camps", drove down just about every dirt track and road there was and did over 1500 kays not towing the van, and walked or rode the bike over the same distance....or so it seemed! I came across some prime fishing areas. Tried most, all the time practising my "Catch and release" philosophy. I was careful. I was wary. I was tentative. I showed common sense so I thought. I kept that healthy regard for the killer instincts of crocs so I thought.

I climbed trees to spin, sat on riverbanks about 1 metre up from the water, stood on sand spits well back from the water's edge. I steered clear of areas where croc slides were evident and if ever I saw a croc in the water or lazing on the bank, I kept going, picking another spot. I admit that I may have only seen or spotted less than 10% of crocs in a given area. Or having picked out a likely productive spot where there appeared to be no crocs, there probably was. I accepted that fact and kept a 'weather-eye' out. But still I thought I displayed a fair degree of common sense. After all, I was by myself and usually, but not on all occasions, no one knew where I was. (Not even me a lot of the time!).

I was miles from no-where and no-one. I was fishing from the banks, working the banks and after all, while it was beautiful country, it was still their domain.

It was while I was camped at Muirella Park for 7 nights that I did most of my 'dirt track' miles.

It was centrally located between the two large "touristy traps" of Cooida and Jabiru. The only places where you could pick up supplies and fuel for a reasonable but still exorbitant price by large towns and city standards. Within easy drive of the main walking tracks, the larger billabongs, the spectacular waterfalls, the testing vehicle creek and river crossings while still being only \$5 per night camping fee. It was also within easy drive albeit dirt roads of the suggested "must visit" spots on the Northern Kakadu Highway. The Rangers were friendly; being a middle-aged couple from Kiama Downs in NSW who had applied for this location for the "Dry Tourist Season" 2 ½ years before their application was accepted. But they were always friendly, enthusiastic and liked a chat. I always told them where I thought I was going and how long I'd be on each daily sojourn into the bush or for a swim, a fish or a photographic escapade.

This day I went to Sandy Billabong for a fish.

The name originality in itself.....all the bloody billabongs were sandy around there!

A 6 kilometre drive via a sandy goat track to a large beautiful series of interconnecting billabongs.

Where the locals took their 'tinnies'. I scouted the area noting three 4WDs and 'tinnie' trailers parked on a sandy spit that protruded out to deeper water on one of the many arms of the billabong system. I noticed a not 'off used' track veering away from the main track. It followed the banks of one of the many arms, meandering around small water-holes, dried up bogs and sandy reaches, smaller billabongs cut off from the main system by receding water levels, groves of scrubby timber and the occasional large tree. I crossed over a wide sandy, pebbly river bed with a thousand small rivulets which formed a 'neck' at the head of the billabong system and obviously drained the system during the 'wet'. I expected more trouble than I actually had in doing this crossing hardly causing the truck heart pains at all. Followed the other side of the bank for about 2-3½ kilometres. Pandanus Palms, Paperbark and Ghost Gums formed a dense line of foliage at the water's edge. A myriad deep holes joined by crystal clear water running over stony shallows or large expanses of deep dark water framed by dense vegetation, fallen trees, logs, snags and Lotus flowers disguising the bank line.

I fished a few spots always keeping a 'weather eye' out around me, behind me and in the waters about me, which did little for my spinning accuracy. For the day's catch of 2 fish, about 5 spits and twice as many hits I lost 3 lures, but it was enjoyable.

At one location I stalked down a sandy incline towards a deep hole in an attempt to locate myself on a narrow spit away from any overhead foliage to be able to cast unobstructed into and around fallen logs that rimmed the opposite bank of the hole. I crept around a mound some metres up from the high tide line. It seemed unusual so I peered back at it. Fresh claw marks were scratched into the sand all around it. Several slide marks grooved towards the water's edge not far from me. I froze, peering around me like the great white hunter that I wasn't, carrying a lightweight spinning rod and reel instead of a heavy gauge repeating rifle. heard the rustling of disturbed fallen leaves...where? Possibly from over behind another sandy spit that slipped out of the hole into a heavily scrubbed area beside a 'drop-off' dirt bank. I moved sideways past the spit that had been my original destination and climbed up into the fork of a Paperbark tree. I spun underhand into the deep water of the hole losing a lure. My spinning was off; I wasn't balanced and was too wary; not concentrating on the work at hand, continuously looking around with my mind not really on the fishing. I stayed in the tree for some 30 minutes before edging my way down and skirting through the bush away from the Billabong back to the truck.

I wended my way back along the track stopping occasionally on high-banked areas where the tree foliage allowed a small window for my natural over-arm spinning style. No takes but a couple of hits. I came upon a very large Paperbark still growing out of a high eroded bank line with its trunk leaning parallel to and about 1-1200mm above the water's surface, cantilevering towards a deep section of water, which shallowed abruptly to the left cascading over a series of stony ledges, marking the extremity of this billabong 'arm' and forming one of the myriad channels that I had forded downstream. I could cast underhand out to my right into the deeper water, around exposed root systems of Pandanus near the bank and several logs and snags. The best of all worlds, deep water, rocky ledge and broken water with snags and shade with relatively deep water to the bank behind me; and me up a tree! But I was still not balanced so I 'tight-rope' walked out along the trunk to the first major confluence of branches, about 2 ½ metres out from the bank line and about 1 ½ metres up from the water's surface. Feet apart on the branch line I continued to cast underhand. I got snagged on about every fourth cast but was able to retrieve without much difficulty. I 'Christmas Treed' about every tenth cast spending some time to free the knots standing 'hands free' on my precarious perch. (You know how my sense of balance is?.....the walk to and fro along this trunk must have looked a sight and in hindsight, the chances of my falling into the water was quite high, obviously something that I did not contemplate when first I spied this 'spot'...silly me!). I caught two fish, one 'pan-sized' (amongst friends), but threw them both back so that they could play with the two lures that I'd lost during the time on this precarious stand.

Two 'tinnies' trolled up.

I didn't even hear their approach (or so I'll say due to my high level of concentration) and turned away from the shallow cascade back into deeper water.

One putted over.

"G'day", one of the three blokes said from the boat. The other two nodded.

"Saw you fishin' down further...you're game. None of our business really, but take a bit of advice...we come fishin' here regular like, live in Jabiru...the place is crawlin' with crocs...we've seen more'n a dozen this mornin'...coupla real big ones...down furtha where you were there's more...workin' the water from th' bank snot a good idea...you know whad I mean...and up that tree you may think ya safe, but you're not! See that bank over there about 60 ta 70 metres away? A croc can slide into th' water over there without you seein' 'im and stay under water all the way buildin' up speed...those crocs are smart..." Waving his hand in a grand manner. "They know 'bout trees like this...this is where birds perch keeping an eye out for fish...the crocs launch themselves out of the water and stun the birds before they can take off...and they bloody quicker than you and can see in tha water better'n you...before the croc has slid back into the water, he's got the bird in his mouth...the bloody bird wouldn't a knowed what hit 'im...that's how quick and cunnin' crocs are...if I were you I'd get outa it! Fair Dinkum...a fish ain't worth the risk...you know what I mean?"

They all looked at me, fags hanging out of their mouths, nodding in unison, their unshaven, tanned faces flashing in the sun.

"Yeah...well thanks, you guys 'id know....I thought I'd be safe up here....ya right, I saw a couple further down, that's why I came up here...but thanks, it ain't worth it...I'll piss off...good fishing, hope yous get a bag..."

I tight-rope walked tentatively back down the trunk of the overhanging large tree, climbed up the steep dirty bank and turned and waved.

They were sitting in their designated plastic swivel seats in the 'tinnie' watching my retreat in a bemused manner. I thought that they had waited until I was safely absconded back inside my truck...for my safety.

I waved again, yelled thanks.

They waved back yelling, "See ya".

I saw them look at each other, nodding sagely, possibly muttering to each other, "Another dumb shit from down south....deserves to be taken!"

They trolled off back down the billabong.

I followed the track back to the 'Launching ramp'. Grabbed my rod and wandered down onto the spit past the 4WD and 'tinnie' trailers and trudged about 20 metres away from where they were parked on the sand. I plopped my gear down on the hot gritty sand and began casting out into the deep water of this large open billabong, or as open as a billabong can be. I stood about 3 metres back from the water's edge after casting from the edge and walked backwards as I 'spun in'. I had

cast and retrieved about 10 times when I heard a “G’day” from behind me.

(It was getting as crowded as a ‘Peak Hour Train’ back home!)

I turned around cradling my rod, as I was about to change to another lure for the deeper water.

A bleached navy blue singlet stretched over an expansive belly. A hat with the largest brim I’d ever seen completely encasing his head and shoulders in shade. I hadn’t even heard his approach on the gritty sand...and he knew it.

He scratched his chin. A sound close to sandpaper on timber emanated from this action.

“You the bloke who was fishin’ the banks down further?”

“Yeah...silly bugger me..!” I nodded towards the trailers. “Ya mates puttered over when I was uppa tree...told me the tricks that crocs can get up to....thought it’d be safer down here...they scared the shit outa me!”

He hitched up his Bombay Bloomers...’could almost choke him now’ I thought to myself.

“They’re wily old buggers....as cunnin’ as a Drover’s dog...never under-estimate them...I wouldn’t fish where ya fishin’ now!”

“Oh...?! I thought I’d be safer down here where every-one is...ya know?”

“Nah...there’s no place real safe...even in a ‘tinnie’...we come fishin’ here all the time...one of the ‘tinnie’s’ got teeth marks on the bow and stern....you’ll always get teeth marks on the propeller...don’t know why....”

Again the ‘sandpapery’ noise as he had another go at his chin, picked at his nose and scratched his crutch in the folds of the blooming shorts that were steadily slipping their way down his frame.

“I’ve even heard of them going down the river....gettin’ up the bank and comin’ back up behind ya’...over a 50 metre sprint they’ll outrun ya’ every time....they’ll just bulldoze ya into the water...ya gorne.....none of my business mate, but I wouldn’t fish anywhere around here without a boat....they’re cunnin’ bastards!”

I packed my gear up and crunched my way beside him back to the ‘tinnie’ trailers. His shorts had fallen down again halfway to his ankles. He hitched them up to ‘choker hold’ height again. I’d hate to think of him running in them!

“Thanks mate....”

Now not even wanting to try and bludge a ride in one of the ‘tinnies’.

“I’ll retire me fishing gear until I get further south outside the croc zone.”

“Mate....my advice to you is to stay away from the water’s edge...anywhere within 5 to 10 metres of it anywhere up here, especially in places like this and bloody hell.....when ya by ya’self...stay well away from deep water...”.

I trudged back to the truck to stow my gear in the back, started up and wheeled round in the small

turning circle at the head of the track that led down onto the spit and the 'launching ramp', giving him a short toot of the horn and a wave. He released his hand from his sliding shorts to return the wave.

I felt frustrated, relieved, wary and scared all at the same time.

The following day I drove up to the north-east corner of Kakadu to the Border Store just south of Ubirr Rock near Cahills Crossing which gave vehicular access into Arnhemland. I'd heard that you could hire 'tinnies' to fish on the East Alligator River. \$60 for half a day. The young bloke who did the hiring seemed surprised that I would even contemplate fishing by myself and advised me strongly against it.

"The crocs have been pretty active this year since the end of the wet. By yourself if you got into trouble, you'd be pushing shit...I mean, I won't stop ya if ya really want to go, but it'd be better if there was at least two of ya...or more....no use temptin' fate for a coupla fish...and as ya said, ya catch and release...well....it's ya choice..."

I declined and walked over to the Border Store.

I bought a coffee and sat down at the outside picnic table in the sun.

Two Rangers were sitting at a neighbouring table chatting and laughing. One white, one black. I started up a conversation with them on uranium mining, protesters, whinging 'greys', tourists in general, people fishing and the supposedly supernatural talents of the local crocodiles....

"What...? Have I got a sign tattooed on my forehead? Dopey New South Welshman...? Please bullshit to me...?" I told them about yesterday's experiences around Sandy Billabong. "Seems to me that these crocs have mystical powers...can almost fly almost!...cunning as shithouse rats...almost could train them to drive a car...I mean, you lot trying to keep all the fish to yourselves?"

All this was said in a good-humoured manner....my typical tongue in cheek sarcasm to which they seemed not to take offence at.

"No mate..." They said in unison. "It's a wonder when you see some of these dopey bastard tourists wading around that there's not a lot more fatalities."

The Abranger shook his head. "There's more crocs down the river now than there was 20 years ago. I called a bloke out of the water at Cahills Crossing just up the road last week...up to his waist in water....you could see a coupla crocs up the river...he was trying to get his lure, it was snagged....shit...half hour later I went back up there and there was two blokes casting away with water up to their knees...dumb buggers...and the crocs were closer! They reckoned they didn't see them....but 'round here just because you can't see them doesn't mean they're not there!"

His mate took up the cause.

"Everything those blokes told you yesterday was the truth...blood oath...and more...especially around boat ramps and river crossings...my advice to you, mate...forget fishing up these parts unless there's a heap of ya...and ya all in boats!"

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It was several months later when I was in Darwin that I read a Newspaper article about the explosion in the number of crocodiles in Kakadu, especially in the Alligator Rivers' systems. A 'count' had been done by CALM Officers straight after the 'wet' with the population of crocs reaching plague proportions almost, in the East Alligator River from Cahills Crossing to its mouth. It was estimated that on this 50 kays stretch there was a croc every 50 metres. The bottom line was that with these numbers it was only a matter of time before there was a fatality or near death 'take'. This actually has happened over the past several months with dogs and horses being taken and several 'near misses' involving humans.

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

I've written before on my comically attempts at snapping 'full frame' shots of local bird life.

If it weren't so comical, it would be tragic!

Or is it the other way around?

Wanting those close-up shots of those magnificent Wedge-tailed Eagles gorging themselves on fresh road kill. The gory details of mangled bodies. The strength and majesty of those beautiful birds frozen forever, captured forever in that one magnificent 'shot'.

To no avail...

I've tried, hoping to get that one special 'shot' of other species. It now seems evident that with my puny 200 lens it would be a matter of luck more than design to achieve my dream.

At Katherine Gorge I spent several hours stalking around my van endeavouring to ambush Apostlebirds and Greater Bowerbirds into that close-up full frame. Even though it is prohibited or at least frowned upon, the only way to entice these birds into a closer 'inspection' was to bait them with food. This I did, half suspecting that that was the way that professional nature cameramen captured those legendary 'shots'. I laid a line of grain and fresh meat out while I slinked prostrate under the van, the camera mounted on the retractable legs of the tripod at the end of the food trail. I got shots of both species of birds, but they lacked the natural pose format of great nature shots. Small pieces of fresh red meat and a suspicious looking trail of grain tended to downgrade the 'naturalness' of the setting. Also, the shadowed form of the under floor strutting sections of the van's underside could not substitute for a tree limb or leafy crown as it intruded into the 'top' of the photograph. And I was still not satisfied with the 'pose'.

"I guess I lack experience," I told myself.

To draw attention to myself further by lying stupidly under the van with my eye glued to the camera would only draw further worried glances, wry smiles or uninvited or snide remarks on my sanity from those passing by.

I'd say that I was just a little eccentric...(?)

To get graphic shots of Red Collared Lorikeets (which are very similar to Rainbow Lorikeets) was all but impossible.

Small Finches were even worse!!!

But at least I tried....doing the 12 kilometre return walk in Kakadu to Motorcar Falls I stumbled onto a 'goldmine' of Finches. It was a small water hole encircled by a wet, muddy periphery. All overshadowed by stumpy, dense foliated bushes. The entire muddy rim of this small pool was alive with a chirping, moving mass of the tiniest Finches. As I followed the track that led obliquely passed the pool, the cloud ascended into the nearby bushes. I stood stock-still. Within maybe 45 seconds, they emerged as a swirling mass from the bushes to settle again around the rim of the pool.

I took another step, the re-action was the same. This occurred maybe 4 or 5 times.

In slow motion and definite movement I extracted the tripod and camera from my backpack setting it up no more than 3 or 4 metres from the mass of chirping bodies. Each time they took wing in fright to take refuge in the dense foliage I froze until they re-emerged to settle at the water's edge.

You can imagine the time-span this involved in 'setting up!'

The sun was getting low.

There was about 4 or 5 different species of Finches, some unimpressive in dour greys and browns except that these were the tiniest of all. Some had exquisite face markings looking "Barn Owl-like" the way the face markings surrounded their heads. Some had contrasting black and white striping across their cheeks, neck and shoulders. Some had scarlet red heads that glowed in the low sun, darkening to crimson or burgundy over the rest of their bodies. Some had yellow heads with lime green arrowheads around their eyes.

By the time I had 'set up' and they had become somewhat used to my presence the light was getting low which meant that I had to use a slower shutter speed in order to get the 'detail'. This would only have created a blurred image because of their constant movement, their nervous agitation. After spending about one and a half hours stalking to this position, I resigned myself to the fact that there was little to be gained in wasting film.

I packed up my gear in an air of frustration.

The air full of alarmed chirps and a wheeling cloud of startled Finches.

Perhaps another day...!?

At Yellow Waters in Kakadu, there is a short 800 metre sturdily constructed, about a 3 metre wide boardwalk that meanders out into a wetland lagoon. Both sides of this hand-railed catwalk were alive with birds accustomed to the frantic 'comings and goings' of chattering, excited tourists, especially the Japanese. Egrets, several Ibis types, Brolgas, several Duck species, Corellas wheeling, screeching into nearby Paperbarks and dead, drowned gums.

At the very end of the boardwalk, about 100-150 metres away, there stood the skeletal remains of a drowned, giant Ghost Gum. In its upper limbs silhouetted against the sky was the unmistakable mish-mash of twigs of an Eagle's eyrie. Two stately, regal Sea Eagles called it home. I stayed there for an hour after first noticing one of the pair take flight in search of food.

It had to come back eventually.

A glimpse of tail feathers, an occasional view of a head as I looked through my binoculars denoted the brooding mate.

To stand erect with the camera to the eye, stabilised by an extended leg of the tripod and leaning back for even a short period of time proved to be murder on my neck and shoulders.

As I said, I stayed there for over an hour, outlasting several groups of like-minded amateur nature photographers as they eventually lost interest and slinked away with failed enthusiasm. All at some stage hoping to get a 'shot' of the returning hunter just before it perhaps alighted onto a nearby branch, a fish or some other delectable piece dangling from its beak; and hoping for his mate to stir, even stand to greet him. But the distance would also mean that definition and detail would be lacking such is the limitations of my equipment.

I was the only one to photograph the event; every-one else had sulked away. The end result of my patient vigil was indeed lack-lustre because of my inadequate gear!

But never mind, I was still proud of my achievement.

My neck and shoulder muscles reminded me for several days of my self-imposed patient vigil.

Even when I retraced my steps back along the catwalk, the bird life that had been so close and abundant was now spread far and wide. Two bus loads of shouting, running pre-adolescents were negotiating the catwalk. An occasional egret was frozen in the patient stature of the hunter, "fibre-glass replica-like" awaiting the careless 'cruise-by' of a small fish.

But you can only take so many full frame 'shots' of Egrets!

The Yellow Water Cruise I thought, would afford a closer inspection of the more exotic examples of bird life that this incredible part of the world supports.

No.... The majority of bird life formed a colourful collar at the far edges of the vast floating grassland vegetation. A splotch of white in the richness of green, easily identifiable through my binoculars, but hardly 'full frame' through a tele-photo lens.

However, a Darter or Snakebird, as it is sometimes called was obligingly 'drying out' with wings spread, perched on a protruding limb of a submerged tree and unable to take wing at our approach.....I got a couple of shots that only whetted my appetite for more.....

A constructed 'hide' at Mamakula afforded a comfortable respite from my usual antics of comic stalking or laying on one's stomach awaiting the slow and tentative approach up the offered food trail of Bowerbird or Apostlebird. But again, the ubiquitous Egret appeared to be the only species perhaps game enough to venture within the perimeters of my lens limitations. A three-quarters of an hour wait provided no other alternate species. Squadrons of Magpie Geese landed or took off in the distance honking their ridicule at my puny equipment... or so it seemed.

It appeared my masculinity was in question and there I was standing impotent in my Yakka Stubbies!

At Ubirr in the north-east corner of Kakadu beside and overlooking the floodplains of the East

Alligator River, I was just returning to the car park after visiting the “Rock Art Gallery” of kindergarten-like, X-ray stick men representing the finest examples of Abpaintings, when I ran into the Melbourne couple who had camped beside me for a time at Katherine Low Level Caravan Park. Them of the eager bird watching fame. Their enthusiasm boiling over with their “finds”...but no photos taken!

Their equipment more basic than mine!

We shared mutual impotent stories.

Places we'd been, those recommended for the future (they had travelled further and faster than my 'snail-pace progress'....but then they had less time), places to miss, etc.

We spied almost simultaneously the most spectacular pose that I would have the opportunity to photograph in my entire travels!

About 500-600 metres from the car park, a slender stone 'obelisk' rose some 15-20 metres above the surrounding plain. Spindle-like, it protruded from the swampy ground. Its base densely collared by the thin, black trunked and sprayed dark green thin fronds of Pandanus Palms. Standing rigidly atop on one leg was the stark outline of a Jabiru, brilliantly back lit by the low angled sun. The black, blues and reds of its plumage starkly contrasted against the fierceness of the blue sky. It looked magnificent through our binoculars, the whole scene beautifully balanced and sun-lit, but too far away to capture with my lens. A 600 minimum would be required.

A classic going begging.....

For about half an hour I led them circuitously through the swampy ground. They were constantly worried about crocs. I endeavoured to allay their fears by stating that there were three of us...one person was a big enough mouthful, so with three of us, it lengthened the odds. Continuously playing on their enthusiasm for capturing that classic 'shot' that they would always cherish for the rest of their lives...even if it may end soon in a flurried attack of snapping jaws and swirling serrations! But in the end it was the lack of solid ground and the incessant biting of 'midges' and sand flies that weakened their resolve. I begrudgingly led them out of the swamp, surprised that we had gone in so far without achieving our goal.

I was sensible enough to realise that I would be tempting fate to enter the swamp by myself....but I thought about it!!!

Even though I had seen a fair number of Jabiru, albeit from a distance, I had yet to get a decent shot of one. For their relative size they appeared to be timid, even shy private birds. Careful to retain a respectable (to them) safe distance from the prying eye of a camera lens.

This almost manic resolve on my part to capture that one special shot reminded me of my unsuccessful attempts at photographing Cassowaries in their natural habitat at South Mission Beach in Queensland. I walked and pedalled my bike for miles along formed hiking trails through the last vestiges of natural, untouched tropical rainforest in these parts. The last habitat of that large bird this far south on the Queensland tropical coast.

All these endeavours through pouring rain which was the final traces of Cyclone Rena.

My camera gear wrapped in plastic garbage bags stacked in my backpack. I realised later in hindsight that had I stumbled upon a Cassowary in this dense, wet forest, by the time I had extracted

all my gear and unwrapped and set it up, the bird would be well and truly gone....disappearing into the dense under-brush before I could even get off my bike! My only condolence would have been drenched gear...as I always seemed to be on these sorties!

On only about the one fine, sunny day while I was camped in this area, I was drying out the van and hanging out two weeks worth of washing on the communal clothes-line when a Cassowary and her two chicks came strutting through the camping area.

In my sudden dash to wrench my camera gear out of the van, stalk and 'set-up' to shoot this brood, my shaking hands achieved a lower quality shot than I'm normally known for!!!!

The true joys and marginal returns of the amateur, emotional photographer!!!!

On my departure from Kakadu along the northern Kakadu Highway, I espied several Jabiru wading in small creeks that the road traversed. On a section of elevated road, another floodway over an unmistakable floodplain, I noticed two Jabiru in an almost dried-out creek bed not that far off the road. I pulled onto a level verge at the first opportunity about 500 metres from the small bridge over the creek. Alighting from my truck, I wandered nonchalantly back along the elevated section of the roadway, failing to notice the approach of one of those monster Roadtrains that are common around these parts of the world. I was violently accosted by the wind force of this passing monster and I had no-where to go except over the edge of the 'drop-off' into the swampy floodplain. Even down there almost being swept off my feet by the wind force. My cap was wrenched off my head by the trailing suction force of the four trailer monster and soared erratically several hundred metres to land in the middle of a muddy pool near the bridge supports. I commenced wading into the water in an endeavour to retrieve the cap, immediately sinking to my knees in the muddy slime. I nearly lost my 'Walking Sandals' from the suction as I fought to extract my feet from the mire. A quick walk further down the creek bed supplied me with not only a thin branch with which to fish out my cap, but a very handy and comfortable walking stick.

Surprisingly, the Jabiru appeared to be immune to the passage and noise of the road giant and continued to stand one legged in the position that I had first noticed, albeit a little nervously at my close presence. But as soon as I took a positive step in their direction, they waddled three or four steps further away from me. The wet cap on my head dripping muddy beads of moisture into my eyes and down my back. But at least it kept me cool....the Jabiru now rested the same distance from me as before, their heads swung towards me, their thickish large beaks seemingly out of place, out of balance on their smallish heads which crowned their long, slender, crane-like necks. There seemed to be something not right about their body shapes. The body too bulky for the thin legs. The head too small for the long neck. The beak too thick for its length and for the size of the head. They lacked the slender proportions of an Egret; the powerful yet graceful balance of Pelicans.

The two Jabiru were still within 'stalking' distance, standing nervously together further up the creek bed. I began my slow approach, but as I advanced they retreated at the same pace keeping frustratingly the same distance away, just out of 'full frame shot'.

I slowly advanced.

They slowly retreated.

I circled to one side of the creek bed now large ponds, muddy and languid. They strutted nonchalantly to the other bank with the water between us. The elevated road now unsighted, lost as the creek snaked, the stunted tree-lined growth obscuring the road from view. Passing vehicles now just a swoosh intermingled with the bush sounds. Rustling leaves, the sweet chirps of Finches, the

abrasive squawks of Honeyeaters. My actions were now slow motion movements, as time seemed suspended. The two birds were no more than 20 metres from me on the opposite bank under the shade of a Paperback stand. I set up my tripod, the camera already attached.

I started to focus in....

One of the Jabiru stiffened, crouching on its legs; stiffening its neck pulling it slowly to its body; opening its wings. The other also going through these actions to commence take-off.

All this came to me in slow motion...time having adopted a 'frame by frame slo-mo' cant....

The muddy waters of the languid pond seemed to take on a life of its own...the water commencing a rippling effect seeming to emanate from the centre of the pond as a stone is tossed into a mirror-smooth water surface with the rippling effect radiating out....

But I knew I hadn't tossed a stone....

Glimpses of rows of serrations breaking the surface...

Now a definite bow-wave breaking the surface...coming towards me....

All this perceived in a fraction of a second but seeming to last...to roll on forever. As I half stood from my crouched position over the camera, I grabbed the neck of the tripod just underneath the mounted camera...the first Jabiru with its wings to full stretch, its legs bent commencing to straighten to help it into the air...the second Jabiru imitating the minuscule preparations of hurried flight...me half turning seeing all these things in a split second, sprinting, nay, fleeing towards several Paperback behind me. My heart rate absolutely exploding within that brief second when all those other pictures were indelibly fused into my brain...I seemed to clear three metres without touching the ground, hitting the trunk of the tree that I was fleeing towards without knowing it was there; or so bloody close; or so it seemed that that was where I was going....slipping at the point of impact with the camera and tripod falling to the ground. As it fell, it glanced off the tree trunk jarring the back open to expose the previous hard won shots. Again, before it had hit the ground, I was swinging up to the first fork which I felt was dismally low; so close to the ground, then scrambling further past the second and third forks as both Jabiru were being released from solid ground. I seemed to 'monkey' further up the tree realising that I had fortunately chosen the largest and most substantial tree, never having noticed the fact that there were trees behind me of that size as I had stalked towards this pond. Before I had reached the safety of the highest point that I thought I could go without stressing the carrying capacity of the limbs, I turned my head to see the two birds wheeling across the water surface. Wings frantically beating, gaining height and speed, their legs dangling with their feet outstretched as if in panic but slowly retracting into their solid bodies. The deep dark blue of their heads and necks shining in the sun.....again in slow motion.

The rippled, disturbed water returned quickly to the breeze dimpled dirt colour. No evidence of the apparent savagery below the surface remained. The squawking alarm of a wheeling cloud of Corellas the dominant sound along with the thumping tempo of blood surging, pounding my ears.

And I couldn't remember what shots had been on the now exposed roll of film lying at the base of the tree in the mud.

A couple of toes ached, the inside of both my legs was chaffed, my right shoulder had abrasions and my left arm and wrist were bleeding. I had no idea how these injuries occurred and it took some

time for the pain to register in my brain. Still trembling, I chain-smoked three cigarettes! I perched in that tree for over 60 minutes; safely I hoped about 3 metres up. My camera and tripod lay askew at its base. The back open like the jaw of some prehistoric beast. The yellow film roll case exposed like some contorted tongue. The lens glinting, the death stare unblinking of a doomed 'one-eyed' species lying on its side in the mud pointing towards the dirty sheen of water; its last forlorn struggle to reach the salvation of the water dashed. One of its tripod legs stiff in rigor mortis pointing towards the sky.

After what seemed like an eternity, I trepidly descended, an eye always focused on the serene surface of the water hole. Picking up the camera and tripod, I trod stealthily through the stunted tree growth edging the watercourse and away from the scene of panic. I circled out onto the burnt grassland, which was surprisingly spongy underfoot. I circled back to the road and the safety of my truck. With windows wound shut, the air-conditioning blasting to cool the 'fear sweat' which covered my body, I checked out everything for damage. A little bit of dirt. A bit of mud. An exposed roll of film. Some grazes and a bit of blood. Bruising I surmised that would come out in the next hour or two. The same for screaming muscles which were starting to signal their existence. These things the only apparent consequences of my silly escapade and in hindsight, my total lack of common sense.

My steely resolve not to fish alone in these dangerous habitats now accompanied by the decision to fore-go nature photography in similar abodes.

Not that I'd captured any unforgettable pictures of the local bird life...in fact for all my endeavours, I had bugger all!!!!

The need for a stronger, bigger lens burnt into my brain. Up close and personal a dying emotion...in more ways than one....!!

pcb©

13/7/99

SOMETIMES THE LOVER; FOREVER THE HUNTER

Ben and Judy were their names.

A gregarious young couple in love with life as much as each other. Forever happy. An infectious state of affairs that affected those that had the good fortune to cross their paths as the two young adventurers meandered on their way.

They'd been travelling for about 12 months leaving the cold of Adelaide to head up through the

middle to Darwin. Crawling down the West Coast hoping to be back home for Christmas '99. Missing their families and friends. Travelling and living in a beat-up 'V Dub' van. Sleeping in it or under the stars, or when forced to by marauding clouds of mosquitoes or sand flies, under an ancient Arabian shaped tent of mosquito netting big enough to stand and cook in but providing little if any privacy.

Their last big fling before careers, domesticity and child rearing tethered their up until now, nomadic lives.

They'd usually camp rough off the side of the road, beside a billabong or a lazy, muddy river or creek. Very rarely entering the high priced regimentation of a Caravan Park. They said they needed a rest, a warm shower, a line full of washed clothes and a van full of dust needing to be washed. So they came here to a Caravan Park on the banks of Lake Kununurra, pitching their tent right at the water's edge well away from the gleaming white vans and spotless 4WDs.

In the most secluded spot that the Park could offer.

Ben by his own admission was not a fanatical fisherman. He couldn't understand the rabid fascination of some to stand for hours with a rod in their hand. He classified himself more as an opportunistic angler throwing a hand line into the water, tying it to a tree and forgetting about it. If he caught something well and good; they had fish that night for tea.

If not, he wasn't perturbed; a heated can of spaghetti was just as nice!

northern parts of Australia. He'd picked it up off the Broome, Derby or Darwin Dock. They couldn't remember. Left behind accidentally by some absent-minded angler.

Pasta or one minute noodles. The usual, easy menu of all of us who lead a nomadic life-style such as this. Judy had not been for a swim and was now feeling frisky herself. Ben went for the swim and checked out his 'fixed' line to no avail. The bait was still untouched. Judy prepared a scrumptious meal of noodles and salad but the descending cloud of mosquitoes forced them into their 'transparent' tent to finish off the meal washed down with some fine local wine. Both were feeling frisky. Ben wouldn't go for a swim. He washed up the plates at the edge of the lake and checked the line again. Nothing. He tied the line around his big toe before re-entering the lair with a glint in his eye. They settled down onto the thin sponge bedding. Laying on top of their sleeping bags to enjoy a little more wine before falling asleep. The soothing, dancing pattern of the flame from their citronella bucket their only light except for the soft moon glow rippling across the surface of the lake. A slight breeze offered some relief from the day's build-up of heat. Their heat suffusing with the idyll surroundings. A little more wine as they lounged beside each other, an occasional smooch, a whispered word, a giggle, a soft caress. Enjoying the setting if not the privacy that their tent failed to provide.

The talk became more intimate, the gentle foreplay of lovers more earnest.

The taking of fish far from his mind, if not his big toe!

It was at that moment almost at the point of no return when the intimacy escalates to new heights; when you stand on the abyss; when the mountains meet the heavens; when you begin the soaring flight to ecstasy; when the body shakes loose the physical constraints of the materialistic world; when the waves begin to crash upon the shore that he felt the slight tugs of pressure transmitted through to his toe.

He didn't at first comprehend, the fishing line long forgotten as he rode the roller coaster ascent toward euphoria. Just as he realised the meaning of those slight sensations from his foot, the line went taut almost severing the toe from his foot. Like a heavy garrotte in the hands of a 'professional' slicing through muscle, tendon, windpipe and arteries as the pressure is quickly and adeptly applied, so the fishing line sliced through the soft flesh at the base of his toe. If Ben had been that sort of lover, the sudden screams of agony and a string of expletives could have been misconstrued as shrieks of ecstasy. But Judy knew her man and had never seen such writhing or heard such language at that critical moment from him before.

She knew it was not of her doing...she was quick that way! But for the life of her, she had no idea what was wrong and even though she too, was at that euphoric level, this strange behaviour from her lover caused her bliss to be shattered and be replaced with a wave of anxiety. But before she could put words together, Ben leapt from the shared 'love bed' and failing to unzip the door flap, crashed through with a sickening rent of tearing material, screaming a string of expletives as he went.

Quick...the torch, love...the bloody torch!"

His naked butt and now flaccid manhood disappeared into the blackness of the night, into the clouds of mosquitoes. He needed to get some slack in the line; to take some pressure off his toe. In his haste and suffering real pain, he forgot that they were pitched at the top of the bank and with a mighty scream he slid down the muddy bank into the water. He managed somehow during his headlong plunge to grab onto the fishing line. He came up gasping, waist deep in water swearing and yelling to his beloved at the same time even though this would not seem possible. "Quick...a torch, love.... Get the bloody torch!"

Judy in the meantime was aghast at this untimely and sudden withdrawal and it took her some time for her to re-gather her composure and realise that she was stark naked. She found and turned on the torch and began rummaging around for clothes, intent on making herself more presentable before exiting the tent in a somewhat more decorous manner. As women tend to do...even in an emergency.

But the constant movement of the lighted torch as she scrambled on all fours around the transparency of the mosquito netting only heightened the sense of erotica for those people who had now been awakened by the yelling and swearing and who were now peering lasciviously through the drawn curtains of their caravans. The light beam spotlighted, silhouetted and highlighted the various curves and private parts of her person as she frantically scurried around the floor. Managing to only hide and confuse those bits of underwear she was so intent on finding. Ben continued to scream and yell out conflicting demands causing her to become more confused and heighten her anxiety.

"Quick love.....the bloody torch...get the bloody torch...don't worry about your bloody knickers...bring the bloody torch...put something on.. The bloody mossies are murderous...the bloody torch...bring it out here...quick!"

She still had no idea on the cause or the reason for the sudden extrication of her betrothed and more out of fear than frustration with tears streaming down her face, she donned Ben's underdaks...back to front. She staggered through the torn and tattered netting that once was the door oblivious to the ogling eyes still trapped behind closed curtains and locked caravan doors. She bobbed and bounced bare-breasted to the edge of the bank just as Ben managed to haul himself out of the water and up onto the bank.

She played the torch beam over his naked and now mud encrusted body.

“But you’re naked...!” She exclaimed. Stating the obvious that was clearly apparent to all the inquisitive and prying eyes. She played the torch down his entire body as though prolonging this erotic ‘stage show’ for the lecherous few. She stayed the beam on his foot.

“You’re covered in mud...and your toe is bleeding bad...! You’ve got bloody fishing line caught around your bloody toe...!”

Ben was now standing on the bank, the white cleft of his arse shining brightly in the moon-glow against his darkened, muddy buttocks as he bent over and began to haul in the line hand over hand.

“Ben!....You’re bloody naked!”

Glancing around seemingly unperturbed with her own bared breasts.

“I’ll go and get your jocks...”

She looked down realising for the first time her own state of undress.

“Oh!....I’ll get a knife to cut the line off your toe...it’s bleeding bad.”

“No, forget about that...just shine the bloody torch out onto the water...we’ve got a fish...a bloody big fish!”

She quickly forgot about Ben’s toe and both their states of undress as the light picked up the broiling water and caught the brilliant flashes of silver as the big Barra cart-wheeled, fishtailed and jagged across the surface of the water. Ben was hauling madly hand over hand on the thick line, the coils of retrieved line snaking on the ground around them. Judy was catching the excitement of the moment, jumping up and down shouting instructions and tangling further the line curling at their feet.

The big Barra was slowly tiring, being gradually forced towards them when suddenly at the periphery of the torch beam two red eyes glowed low in the water. They seemed to notice and comprehend in unison.

“It’s a bloody croc...!” Ben shouted and they both began yelling obscenities with Judy energetically jumping up and down clapping her hands, out-doing Ben in the strings of invective. The large fish seemed to sense the croc’s presence and instinctively started to swim away from it towards the bank and hopefully the underwater snags. Ben glanced down at the tangled mess of line around his feet and ankles and still firmly tied to his toe.

“Bloody hell Judes...get a knife...bloody quick!”

For one ghastly moment she thought that her beloved was going to do battle with the croc.

“Yar not gunna do a ‘Dundee’ are you Ben?” She asked anxiously.

“What....!?”

He looked at her in disbelief while still frantically retrieving the line.

“Bloody hell no!...but look at this line...if the croc takes that fish and heads out as it bloody well will, it’ll take me with it...get a bloody knife...!”

Judy was galvanised into action spinning quickly, falling and dropping the torch, which bounced down the bank and into the dark water with a loud plonk. The beam played ‘higgle-de-piggle-de’ over the now boiling water. Red eyes flashed, then lighted bank, then darkness, then flashes of bare flesh, bare muddy legs.

“The bloody torch...get the bloody knife...the croc’s getting closer...”

In Judy’s frenzied mind all a mish mash of commands. She frantically crawled towards the bank...

“No..no..no... Judes...the bloody knife...get the knife...”

She lunged towards the V Dub, retrieving a knife in record time, wondering to herself how she could have laid her hands so quickly on one. She rushed back to Ben’s side to drop again on all fours to madly begin flailing into the tangle of line on the ground, cursing near hysterically as she swung the knife. The croc made a sudden lunge at the now mortified fish, snapping its jaws around its body, lifting it out of the water at the same time in a stupendous show of speed, agility and power. The reptile turned its body seemingly in mid air and with a thrash of its tail submerged, leaving nary a wake on the surface of the water. The torch bobbed lazily. Bits of cut fishing line spumed into the air, the remnant of the line in Ben’s hand cut deeply like a hot knife through butter as the croc and its prey retreated rapidly into the murky depths of the lake.

Ben let out a scream of agony. “Give me the knife...the knife...the bloody knife!”

Judy leapt to her feet, swinging the knife like a machete at the fast disappearing line that was now caught in the folds of soft flesh of Ben’s hand. The line between his hand and the water went slack as Judy over-balanced sliding down the muddy bank and into the water with a terror-stricken scream, managing luckily to slice the line as she fell.

“In any case,” he stated as an after-thought, “Judes came out of that water and up the bank faster than she went in...covered in mud like I was!”

By now of course, the Owners of the prying eyes leering at the naked antics of the two realised that it was not the rituals of some Satanic sect or perverted sexual practice, but in fact was the normal and excited reactions of two people in trouble and they began to nervously leave the safety and security of their vans to lend a hand....and to ogle at close quarters!

After having their naked and decidedly muddy bodies wrapped in blankets, it was by consensus agreed not to free Ben’s wounds of trailing fishing line. The flow of blood was stemmed as much as possible without endeavouring to cleanse the wounds. Both hand and foot were wrapped in pressure bandages of towels, T-shirts, anything that was close by and both were bundled into a truck for a quick trip to the local hospital. This was after some prolonged discussions as to whose vehicle was to be used as emergency transport as the state of the two patients caused heart-burn in many; they being the Owners of gleaming, polished 4WDs.

With all it seemed breathing a sigh of relief, a young bloke offered his dirty Twin Cab Ute for ambulance services. It was covered in dust inside and out. The two “Lovers of life and each Other” were bundled into the back seat after all the young bloke’s belongings were unceremoniously dumped and he took off with a flurry of stones spurting from his spinning back wheels...and a length of trailing fishing line that no one seemed to notice.

A high pitched scream of agony abruptly stopped the truck in its tracks. The concerned crowd surged towards it. The fishing line had caught under the rear spinning wheel causing Ben's big toe to be neatly and cleanly amputated. Again a lengthy discussion took place with the consensus being that due to their remoteness, there seemed little likelihood of microsurgery being available at the Bush Hospital. This was of little consequence because during the frenzied attempts to quell the new flow of blood, the severed toe was misplaced among the piles of towels and other material used to pressure wrap his foot anew. It ended at the water's edge having dropped from the various towels and 'make do' bandages as they were vigorously rinsed out in the lake's waters.

The young bloke and his filthy truck started off again towards the small country hospital.

It was dark and very late, every one having retired to their respective vans and tents, so there was no one to witness the emergence from the water of "George", the 'pet' fresh water crocodile. It always spent the night lazing on the bank of the lake within the confines of the Caravan Park. A large Barra tail and luminous pink fishing line hung from his mouth. No one was there to witness the antics of the reptile as it clumsily endeavoured to pick up the prized morsel near the water's edge. And there was no one to appreciate the look of utter satisfaction as he gave thanks for a superb meal finished off with such a tender dessert.

Every-one knew about 'George'. He was a 'Freshie', completely harmless, a favoured resident and an attraction at the Park.

Judy returned to the Van Park the next morning showered and in borrowed clothes. She immediately dismantled their camp and relocated their entire belongings to the back fence, the farthest point away from the edge of the water. Ben's hobbled return was witnessed by only a few of the people who were present on that fateful night, most having hit the road. It is said that the former "Lovers of life and of each other" sat in stony silence with their once infectious natures sadly extinguished. I've heard said that it was because Judy could not reconcile the fact that her 'lover' could 'go fishing' whilst pretending to make love and was willing to sacrifice her to the dark murky depths of a crocodile's lair instead of attempting to rescue her as one should...so the 'story books' say. No amount of discussion could get her near the water's edge again...or camping for that matter!

Ben's bent sense of humour only fuelled her growing discontent as he hobbled around displaying his disfigured foot like some sort of sporting trophy. It was also intimated that like Samson with his hair, Ben's libido had been firmly rooted in his now missing big toe and I could imagine that he would be a "one toe-less celibate" for the rest of his life.

Judy, alone with tear streaked face boarded an interstate bus that would take her to family and hearth and away from the V Dub van and her once cherished plans to share the rest of her life with her 'beloved'. As she did so she was heard to mumbled, "Sometimes a Lover; always the bloody Hunter!"

pcb©

24/9/99

“GIVE US A LIFF MATE....PLEASE?”

I was at Kalbarri about 570 kays north of Perth and about 150 kays south of Geraldton.

A lovely part of the coast.

A backwater holiday town nestled at the mouth of the “mighty” Murchison River surrounded by the Kalbarri National Park. A plateau of low heath like vegetation was sliced by the river that created the ubiquitous gorge or two with the high ground meeting the Indian Ocean at ancient cliff lines that were serrated with steep coastal ravines. A nice layback spot and at this time of the year, being the “Off Season”, my kind of place. It would be over-crowded during the Christmas holiday period. But at this time of the year with the seasonal blustery and at most times uncomfortable sou-south-westerly winds, the four caravan parks, numerous rentals and holiday accommodation were less than 30% occupied.

A lovely spot.....

The serpentine river did a double S bend near its mouth. The mouth was a treacherous wash of rocks, reefs and curling backwash. The quieter waters upriver sheltered a lively deep-sea fishing and cray boat fleet. It should also be noted that this stretch of coastline is the final resting-place of a number of Portuguese sailing vessels that had blundered onto the myriad shawls and reefs.

Shipwreck survivors set foot on the Great South land over 100 years prior to Cook discovering the eastern coast in 1770.

A lovely spot..... But I was barricaded in the van watching the superb brilliance of the 2nd. Test against the Pakis where Gilchrist and Langer won the test with an “against the odds” 6th wicket record partnership. Luckily the Test was played in Hobart and with Daylight Saving, commenced at 8:00AM with stumps at 3:00PM local time. This allowed me some time to explore, walk, swim and fish....and that’s another story!

A lovely spot.

I stayed there a week.

After one of the best Test Matches with its “to-ing and fro-ing”, its suspense and its excitement, I travelled to the gorges inland, the coastal gorges (?) and cliffs and trepidly took the coastal track of 60 odd kays to Port Gregory over corrugations, sandy washouts and swirling dust; through hilly, undulating country crazy-quilted with scrubby tree lines denoting creek beds, floodways and marshy ground and the perimeters of golden wheat fields. Port Gregory and the nearby ruins of the historical Convict Dispersal Settlement of Lynley are really the antithesis of the hamlets that the “main road by-passes”; one General Store, a handful of “week-enders” of bits and pieces and on-site caravan accommodation in the “Half Star” Caravan Park of questionable comfort for the seasonal Cray fishermen. Back onto tar to head southeast towards the main coastal highway at Northampton. This town is a small highway village of historical stone buildings; awnings strutted at kerb lines and a low slung, elongated pub with a wide front veranda typical of the early pioneer architecture. Just after the town you pass the largest horizontal, gable roofed grain storage shed I’ve ever seen which was further extended by six or seven “open air” wheat bins of gigantic proportions, half of which were full. The grain “dunes” covered with huge, heavy blue tarps.

It was harvest time in this wheat belt area.

I then headed north up the main coastal highway with its show of wildflowers speckling the fringes of the road with brilliant purples, crimsons, golds, lemons, white and silvers. You flash through the non-existent hamlet of Binnu. This “busy metropolis” cowered behind a ridgeline out of sight. The roadway signs heralding this burg overshadowed by a similar sized grain store and open air bins that were being rapidly filled with grain. And this is considered a minor grain producing area.

Another 50 odd kays north up the highway I slowed at the Kalbarri turn-off.

Two Aborigines with their belongings strewn around them were lying on their “bed rolls” under the shade of a large “Tourist Information Board” on the other side of the road. As I slowed to take the corner, the younger of the two stirred from his lolling position and sprinted across the road to stand in front of the truck, blocking any further progress. I was forced to brake to a stop...but I had to think twice about it!

He staggered like a....not a drunk...more like a simpleton, around to my open window.

“Ya gonna Carn...a...von?”

“No mate...”

To me it was obvious why I wasn’t! I was facing in the opposite direction towards Kalbarri.

“I wish ya gonna Carnarvon!” He slurred.

“No mate...I’m headed to Kalbarri.” Again pointing a finger in the direction of Kalbarri.

“Wissa gonna Carnarvon...give usa liff?...jus uppa road...me brudda’s crook.”

“No mate, I’m going to Kalbarri”. As I inched forward he hung onto the door.

“Me brudda’s crook....give usa liff ...jus uppa road.” Pointing towards Kalbarri. “Not far....’bout ‘leven kay”.

“I thought you said you were going to Carnarvon?” I asked.

He looked at me blankly then with a pleading expression, “Nah...yeh! We bin waitin’ for a liff...no blurry liff...went.... gorn wit outus...me brudda’s crook.... give usa liff jus uppa road to me farda’s farm...’bout ‘leven kay/”

I tried to explain the deficiencies of only having one passenger seat and no room in the back to put their meagre belongings because of all my gear stacked there. With a pleading look that would’ve melted his mother’s heart he begged. “Please mate.... please.... not far.... me brudda’s crook...please mate?”

I relented, telling him that he’d have to sit on his “bruddas” knee or vice-versa.

The parody was lost on him.

“Yeah!!!” He retorted joyously as though this was his salvation.

He sprinted across the road to pick up his collected belongings in one overnight bag and numerous plastic bags, rolled up his bed roll and kicked his brother into action at the same time. The dopey looking ‘crook brudda’ struggled to his feet to roll up his bed and swoop up his gear in a plethora of plastic bags. I endeavoured to relocate and hide my photographic gear, knapsack, drink container and other odds and ends I had sitting on the front passenger seat beside me. I fingered the fish filleting knife that I always carried in the map storage bin beside my seat. It was jammed down out of sight. I positioned the handle for a quick release if needed.

Stupid me!

The spokesman, who appeared to be the younger of the two, sprinted back over the road with his arms full, followed closely by his brother sick or not. He crammed his bags over the front seat into the back jabbering in Abspeak all the time to his brother. He then squirmed over into the back lying prostrate on my toolbox as his brother passed over his meagre plastic bag offerings and bedroll. It sprang open, loosely draping over my head. It smelt dirty, dusty and dank. I shuddered as I thought what might be falling off or hopping off it all over me. The ‘crook brother’ carefully seated himself leaning slightly forward in the passenger seat. As though he had stomach cramps or something. I felt for the hilt of the knife again.

It felt friendly, re-assuring. Stupid me!!!

The ‘crook brother’ peered around. He had a “stoned”, half Mongoloid look, rocking slightly in the seat. I started off.

“Ya godta ‘moke?”

“Yes thank you. I have.”

I know that it was somewhat condescending and demeaning. I’d used this reply when I was in Borrooloola to obtain a confused response. It seemed that this parry was not the way the script should progress as they knew it. The Mongoloid look intensified as though this response was taking some time to register and then to confuse. You could almost see the spark of comprehension light up his glazed eyes.

He smiled a foolish, idiot grin.

“Can I have oneya ‘mokes?....please?”

Slurring the words, apparently thinking that the ‘magic’ word would resolve the problem...it usually did at home I could almost hear him rationalise. I handed him the pack that was perched on the dashboard. I shook my head.

“I’m giving you guys the lift...etiquette usually requires that you give me one of yours!”

I’d have refused their offer if they had, unsure of what I may get!

My attempt at witticism and sarcasm falling way outside their sphere of comic understanding.

I endeavoured to engage them in small talk, their father’s farm, their reasons for going to Carnarvon, their recollections of Kalbarri, how long they had lived there, etc., etc. Each attempt was greeted with a slurred response that I could not fathom. Only answering my questions after a jabbering prompt in Abspeak from the bloke in the back. The journey fell into a grunted silence, a

gentle swaying to and fro of the bloke in the front seat, the distance seeming to be a great deal longer than 'leven kay....jus uppa d'road' and each smoking two of my cigarettes.

The bloke in the back broke the silence every now and then, "Not far...owny 'bout 'leven kay...canna usa da phone?...eh?"

Bloody hell!

"No...sorry." I replied aggressively. "It's broken...not working. I have to get it fixed when I get to Geraldton..." Though it worked perfectly.

"Jeez...it hot back 'ere!" said the bloke who now lounged comfortably in the back. "Ya godta 'moke?"

"I suggested you sit on your brother's knee or vice-versa...open those sliding windows...I'm almost out, you've almost cleaned me out of smokes...the meter's running though!"

The truck was filling with the smell of unwashed bodies. I leaned back and slid open the window and turned on the A/C full blast as the crook brother began motioning with his left arm, "Here, here...turn inna here!" All in a mumbled jumble. I went to stop at the mouth of the dirt track that wound into the bush and out of sight of the main road. The bloke in the back said, "Jeez...canya take us uppa track to d' ouse...not far...uppa track...we can't walk wid all our gear...me brudda's crook." Which I was rather suspicious about by this time....maybe it was all in his mind, maybe, I thought to myself. I slid off the seat belt and took the knife out of its scabbard and let it dangle from my hand down beside the seat, hoping neither saw my furtive preparations for that bundled escape if needed...silly me!

I headed up the track.

"Bit farda up...true d'gate....to d'leff." Gesturing with his right arm.

The bush eventually opened up onto a small community hamlet. A compound more or less. Several barns of recent construction. Steel framed, corrugated iron roofs and sides. An Artesian bore gurgled water into a large shallow concrete walled tank, the overflow bubbling into a rocky creek bed. Electricity lines went to every building. TV aerials sat askew on every house. About 6 or 7 new impressive, colourbond clad dwellings with deep recessed low roofed verandas encircling each house. The houses were evenly spaced facing into what appeared to be a 'common' area. Washing flapped lazily on several lines. Clean, cute piccaninnies in nothing but disposable nappies played happily on a large playground setting overseered by a group of Aboriginal women sitting cross-legged under the shade of a large Gum in the centre of this green grassed communal area. Smaller tots crawled or climbed over the seated women. Several late model cars, a Landcruiser and two Troopies were parked neatly near the larger of the two barns. Two slender nosed tractors peeped through the half-opened doors of the smaller barn. Several car wrecks, flat-topped trucks and farming implements and paraphernalia were arranged to one side of the barn, shaded by a 'lean-to' open-ended roof. The normal flotsam of farming life but neatly arranged. A large flatbed, bogey wheeled truck was up on bricks, its rear wheels splayed on the ground, its 'diff' and axle rods neatly aligned on the rear tray bed as though an absent Mechanic knew what he was doing.

I pulled around on the dirt road that circled the green lawn of the 'common' and its large shade tree centre piece. No one came to investigate my intrusion but suspicious large eyes watched my slow progress. The children stopped playing, thrusting out little bellies, and plunging their fists in their mouths. The 'crook brudda' slid from his seat and began taking his belongings from his younger

half now double up in the back of my truck. He had a look of total disconnection on his face; a face lacking emotion as though he was just going through the motions, concentrating purely on the difficult task of gathering his plastic bag entombed luggage. He looked at me as though I wasn't there.

“Godt one furda road?”

I looked at him and shook my head trying to project my most patronising stare. There was no change in the emptiness of his face. I picked one out of the pack and lit it for him as he leaned across the front seat. His eyes drooped almost shut, the cigarette hanging limply from his lips. He looked as though he was falling asleep! He puffed it alight, turned slowly away from my truck and deliberately picked up his bed roll and plastic bags and without a word of thanks, good-byes or kiss my arse walked towards the nearest house as a large, rotund woman emerged from the shadows of its veranda. Blue-black skin glistened in the sun. Large cheeks, nose and lips. A series of chins cascaded down to an ample bosom. Bare, thick tree trunk arms were crossed seeming to hold up her breasts from spilling down her body. A clean, bright orange long peasant dress hung off her large frame and touched the ground to accent her bulkiness. A bright red scarf clashed with the colour of her dress and was drawn tightly around her head in the manner of the ‘big southern mamma’ nanny epitomised endlessly in films of the American south.

He walked towards her, as she stood with feet firmly apart, arms crossed with a look of defiance, almost a scowl on her face. The errant boy dropped his belongings at her feet. His head bowed, arms dangling at his side. A look of total dejection in the mien of his stature.

All this I observed as the younger brother noisily extracted himself and his belongings from the rear of my truck again swiping my head with his smelly, dirty, dusty bedroll. He heaped his meagre worldly goods near the open door of my truck. He took in the scene of his ‘crook brudda’ standing bowed before the angry woman. He looked back at me; his face turning from consternation, apprehensiveness and almost fear to a plucky, bright smile as he realised that I was reading his facial expressions.

“Godt one furda road?” His face turned to a pleading look. “Please mate....please?” In much the same way his pleading look had softened my resolve and accepted them into my truck to give them the lift.

I got the impression that it may have been a well-rehearsed expression. Being used frequently to get what he wanted and in fact, if I read the situation correctly, may have prevented his and his brother's expulsion from the family for some time, but not having worked on the last occasion.

“You better behave yourselves this time, I think.....don't you? If you want them to give you a second chance?”

Even to my ears it sounded smug and patronising. His face turned to one of abject misery. I thought he was going to cry. His head slowly dropped. Shame crept across his face. I gave him the ‘dregs’ of my pack.

“Keep them...” I said.

He leant into the truck as I lit the fag hanging from his mouth. He took a deep drag, turned, hoisted his swag and shuffled to his brother's side. No good-byes. No thanks. No nod of the head, eye contact or wave of the arm. The woman had uttered no words that I could hear. I looked at the woman as I started up the truck making eye contact without her even altering the expression on her

face. The two boys stood transfixed before her with their heads downcast.

A wizened old man with tight grey curls, grey stubble beard sprinkling a heavily lined face now stood under the awning bracing himself against one of the thin tree trunk supporting columns. The women under the tree were now standing legs akimbo, arms on hips or bodies askew as they nursed the smaller babies off their hips. Older children swung around their legs, fists still shoved firmly in their mouths staring at the two arrivals. Two skinny men were striding forcefully from one of the barns wiping their foreheads and hands on greasy rags. A tall, slender middle-aged man in pressed, clean jeans and bright T-shirt wearing Buddy Holly thick rimmed glasses also strode purposefully from one of the houses. The light coffee coloured skin around his mouth drawn tightly in apparent anger. A ponytail of black-grey hair swung in unison to his stride. A tall, solidly built man appeared from under the truck up on blocks, his blue-black skin glistening. He too, wiped his hands on a greasy rag. He joined the determined progress of the other two men who had emerged from the barn. Two adolescent girls leapt from a shaded veranda of a nearby house, their tight jeans and tank tops accentuating their youthful curves. Their boobs bouncing. One had a sparkling smile, the other a scowl. The coffee coloured man stopped their bouncing progress by a wave of his arm as he stepped up beside 'Mamma'. The man extended his hand in greeting, shaking both of their hands while they still stood cowering avoiding eye contact. The body language of all members still one of 'unwelcomeness'. Apart from the toothy smile from the young girl who now stood with her companion under a shady veranda of one of the farthest houses, the only other sign of welcome was from two mangy dogs who half-heartedly wagged their tails and sniffed inquisitively at the pile of plastic bags lumped around the two young men.

I slowly circled the 'Common' and its large shade tree hoping that my slinking exit would be unobtrusive and not generate too much dust. Several other men from young to middle age had now emerged from various houses and outbuildings and were converging onto the 'Green'. All with rigid scowls on their faces. Not a glance, a wave or recognition of my 'Good Samaritan' act in my direction. It was as though I did not exist and my very being had dissipated and disappeared into the spirit world!

A feeling of complicity permeated my being.

The smell of decay, of unwashed bodies and of staleness still permeated my truck. It took the remaining kilometres back to Kalbarri with all the windows open to force the smell out.

The feeling of contrition taking longer to be exorcised from my soul.

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24/11/99

THE CRUSH SYNDROME IS ALIVE AND WELL

My memory would do a rewind on me whenever I saw them.

Arms, legs and faces sticking out of every open window. Behind every rear window or windshield.

Of the halcyon days of my misspent youth when one of “the gang” had purchased the first car. All of us would pile in when at the time, the number of seat belts did not limit the number of passengers. Six to eight was the normal crush doing the Bankstown or Burwood circuit. Catcalling or sliding to a cool walking pace beside some chick as she walked on the footpath. Getting more adventurous to cruise Pittwater Road which ran from Manly to Palm Beach always on the look-out for “Surfie chicks” thumbing a ride. In hindsight amazed at the number of girls who would clamber into an FJ Holden already over-filled with “Westie Hoods”. To have them sitting on your knee, in your lap, competing with your mates as you adroitly unfastened bras, slid straps off shoulders or dived tongue first down the throat of some “Spunkie”. Long blonde hair, suntanned in a bikini top and shorts, making them agree to forego their intended drop off point to pursue matters further. To ogle at female parts stretched over the front seat, the back seat or some where in between as perhaps your mate was more successful than you...or quicker...amid the profusion of legs, arms or bodies!

Or driving across the Harbour Bridge just on sunset, spotting “Mods” in short “bobbed” cuts, berets, long leather boots, micro minis heading into town for the usual Saturday night excitement. Halfway across the Bridge on the eastern walkway side we’d slide to a stop holding up the entire lane length of traffic. Six guys would clamber out to theatrically open the bonnet then push the supposed mortally wounded vehicle into the space between the vertical “tie beams” of the Bridge to allow the traffic to flow once more. Waiting for the “Mods” to stroll by and sprinting between cars speeding down that outside lane. Climbing over the crash barrier to chat up the “Beauties”. If you “had” them before you reached the tortuous southern stairway that lead down into the back of the Rocks area, you’d signal your mates still waiting patiently at the car. They would physically hold up the lane of traffic to extricate themselves from their hidey-hole and with the straight-through exhaust note splitting the night, would “tramp it” over the Cahill Expressway, double back through Circular Quay and blurt up Argyle Cut to where you were now getting to know the girls better.

For a Saturday night out of inter-racial excitement, at that age you couldn’t do better.

You a “Westie”, them “North Shore mods”!

If a particular Saturday night was not a success so to speak, you let the world know and snubbed your nose at authority by driving the length of the George Street theatre strip in second gear. The exhaust note “pearling” just as the theatre crowd was exiting with every open window of that “hot” Holden framing a “brown eyes” salute.

Those stupid, immature, totally whacked days only lasted a short, harried, exciting 12-18 months until each member of the gang purchased their own wheels. Lowering them with blocks of wood and a hacksaw to the front coil springs and fitting them with extractors and straight-through exhausts. For a short time you did the same circuits as before but each cocooned within your own set of wheels. Caravan “tail-gating” with six or seven cars blasting the night with their exhaust notes, your chick of the moment crushing you against the driver’s door. But that practice was short-lived either because the Police took a dim view of the “parade” and started to cast a more inspective eye over the vehicles or, as was more the case, your favoured chick found the practice boring or wanted to do something else....like go to the Pub, the Drive-in or the favourite “Tail-light Alley”. An occasional get-together crush of mates and birds in the one car was organised but it was rarely

repeated with the same chick.

Ah! The exuberance, the sheer folly, the stupidity of testosterone charged youth....

But I digress, lost in the memories of cheeky, irresponsible, innocent youth...!

But it seems the “Crush Syndrome” is alive and well in FNQ, NT and even more so in FNWA. Especially around the Kimberley area where it would appear, the seat-belt rule does not apply; particularly for the local Abs. An entire family that may number anything up to 12-16 people will cram into a Toyota Troopie. An entire tribe will fit into/onto a 1-tonner or 3 ton flat top truck with the rear springs inverted from the weight. Four or five in the cabin, up to ten kids aligned around the back and sideboards. The central area of the tray reserved for a mountain of slabs of beer being transported where-ever...the kids’ dirty hair splayed back by the force of the wind. Their faces distorted as though they were riding one of those “G-force testing machines” as they hurtle over a dusty corrugated back road.

Whenever I saw this I would again have this instant photo-recall in my brain....of an elderly biker I often saw on his Harley scooting up the Newcastle Expressway. Dirty jeans, “Grateful Dead” black T-shirt, fuzzy grey hair pulled tightly back into a pony tail, his long grey beard split cleanly down the middle and splayed back on either side of his face by the force of the wind like snot tendrils oozing from his nose. WW2 Airforce goggles protecting his eyes. No helmet. With a mixed look of contentment, satisfaction, exhilaration, rebellion, challenge and of the snubbing of authority written on his face. In the way he sat, in the set of his eyes, his mouth, his shoulders...in his attitude.

So too these young kids as they battled the force of the wind sitting with their backs against the backboard. Their heads set at a cocky angle. Exhilaration, rebellion, the snubbing of authority in their mien. Their snot encrusted upper lip exuding tendrils either side of their face blasted by the wind. These Abs, especially of the Kimberley region away from the towns and the scourge of alcohol, are exuberant, having a guileless child-like innocence, an enthusiasm and a love of simple fun. Even the older people laugh and giggle like children; like schoolgirls. You can’t help to be picked up, to feel light-hearted, and to be gladdened by this child-like attitude to life. Until you see them crushed unprotected into and onto their means of transport.....

I was tootling along the highway doing my normal 80-85 kph miles from no-where, driving on a straight flat track heading for Halls Creek when this convoy passed me. A battered, rust bled, dusty, neglected Ford Falcon station wagon led the charge. Packed to the roofline with bodies on the front and back seats and in the boot area where the tailgate was down I supposed, to accommodate the additional passengers! Breathing in carbon monoxide fumes from the exhaust that was sucked back into the vehicle. All the windows down. Small cherubic faces peering through the open rear tailgate window having that healthy hue. Next came a Troopie, again exceeding the legal limit of passengers with bodies crammed in.

Following closely behind this was two flattop trucks. The first with side and backboards again crammed with kids and adults. A few meagre belongings and slabs of beer piled in the middle of the tray.

The last flat-top appeared to be objecting about the speed it was asked to do as it was spewing out an enormous amount of smoke that obscured my vision; but what a frightening sight!

There was about five or six adults crammed into the cab that with a pinch might have taken a maximum of three. The passenger’s side door was missing and it appeared that there was no glass in the windscreen or rear window. Adults and children were perched around the perimeter of the rear

tray where there was no side or backboards. Women were seated against the back of the cab, some holding babies. Kids and men sat with legs dangling over the sides. Becoming air-borne from their tenuous seated positions at every little bump in the road as though the truck did not possess any form of suspension. Kids no more than 4 or 5 seated in this precarious style. Their legs swinging dangerously close to the rotating rear wheels.....but at least it had a flimsy blue tarp flapping violently about over the length of the tray to provide some sort of shade from the hot sun. These kids had that jaunty tilt of the head; snot encrusted top lip and tendrils flailing either side of their faces. Matted, dusty hair defied the force of the wind standing willy-nilly from their heads. The adults appeared oblivious to the latent dangers of the kids' precarious perches. They were too busy trying to obtain some benefit from crooked "rollies" before the passing force of the wind consumed them. Spindly legs dangled, swaying off the edge of the tray. Every one was laughing, giggling; tooth filled smiles glinted in the sun as though this ride was more exhilarating than the roller coaster at Luna Park. A bloke stripped to the waist in dirty, ragged jeans which hung almost at his crutch, filthy hair that would resist a pair of shears as nothing else could possibly have groomed his tresses sat nonchalantly on the mountain of slabs of beer in the centre of the tray. Presumably to steady the swaying load while using his head as a "centre-pole", trying in vain to minimise the flapping of the blue sheet that was tied loosely at the four corners.

The convoy disappeared into the distance doing well over my 80 kph. I half expected to see broken, bloodied bodies strewn over the road as I progressed. They not concerned about their loss....no worries; they could retrieve them on their return journey!!!

I was at Borroloola filling the tank when a Troopie careened into the Service Station in a cloud of dust, braking at the last moment with a sound of metal on metal. Brake pads? Who needs them! Never any thought for anything mechanical being repaired or replaced. Even the exhaust pipe sounded as though it ended at the motor such was the noise! The front and rear doors swung open and an eruption of dirty, ragged, semi naked, laughing, giggling, jabbering children and adults leapt out of the vehicle. Along with three dogs. An avalanche of cans, drinks bottles, stubbies, lolly wrappers and squashed cigarette packets followed, creating an instant garbage dump around the 4WD. It looked at home....I walked past it to pay my bill. There wasn't a clean surface evident anywhere. The windscreen had a smeared "clean" hole of vision in front of the driving position. It was impossible to see through any other part of the windscreen or for that matter, any other glass window as though the "fog" up here in 40 degrees heat was "anodised" to the inner surface. Dust covered everything. The floor and the seats recently vacated were covered in much the same litter as had overflowed to now surround the truck. The dashboard, floor mats, in fact every and all vinyl surfaces were pockmarked from stubbed cigarette burns with the discarded butts forming an almost congealed mass over the floor pans.

A putrid smell flowed from the interior much the same way as when the occupants had disembarked and when the rubbish had overflowed.

I paid my bill, had a drink and a smoke as I watched the discharged garbage being blown around the entire driveway area. With exuberance, a tribal giggle, a harsh loud jabber of Abspeak, they all clambered back into the Troopie. Coke cans, ice-blocks and ice creams, chips and cigarette packs clutched in various hands. Dogs leapt in last, masterfully leaping over bodies licking ice cream as they went. Bodies seemed to squeeze out of windows to allow the cramming of "bruddas" into their allotted positions before doors were loudly slammed shut.

Away they went leaving a moon crater of garbage in the dust slowly being wafted about by the breeze.

It would appear that Jandamara (the rebel native, a former native Police Tracker who led a native

resistance against the 'Whites' in The Kimberley and thus created a legion) had spent all his nights in various "prison trees" and goals around the Kimberley judging by the number of "Pigeon was held here; must see" tourist points of interest.

I'd just made the journey over broken goat track of some 35 kays one way to visit one such location and was returning in the general direction of Derby.

At one point the track bisected a large mud flat of some several hundred hectares.

You could see for miles in any direction.

I guess on a "king tide" and during the wet, the area would be covered entirely with water only centimetres deep more than likely. The track I was travelling on was only millimetres above that again. But for now the area both sides of the track was dry, flat and seemingly as hard as concrete as wheel ruts, doughnut shaped rings and snaking tyre tracks suggested that the local "yahoos" enjoyed the uninhibited exhilaration of speed as they used the mudflats to best advantage. As usual I was miles away as I idled across this landscape taking in the vastness and the intricate patterns gouged into the flatness that would be perhaps obliterated very soon by the action of rising water. On the look out for photo opportunities that would convey, that would capture the patterns, the swirlings to best advantage. I was awakened from my reverie by the sounds of an unobstructed exhaust note. A twin cab Toyota Hi-lux Ute came hurtling passed me on the mudflat. It had no doors, bonnet, mudguards, grille or tailgate. A substantial roll bar enveloped the cab and the rear tray area. Six guys were crammed into the cab (I think), 3 more were standing in the rear area holding onto cross-members of the roll cage. It swerved, snaked, dough-nutted over the flats at high speed. Suddenly it flipped possibly on softer surface, rolling once or twice. Arms and legs seemed to splay momentarily out of the cabin. Two bodies were catapulted crazily into the air from the rear tray landing in a series of rolls on the clay surface. Bodies clambered out of the vehicle now lying on its side. Doubling over with laughter. Back slaps all around.

With tribal co-operation and much loud jabbering in Abspeak, the 4WD reject from a Mad Max film was re-righted.

High fives all around and laughter cackled the air.

I sat stunned into inaction, staring unbelievably at this foolhardy display.

For all I know they could have been blind drunk, I think I'd need to be to just race flat out in a straight line across those flats, let alone move the steering wheel!

Of what I had seen of them up in these parts before grog slowed their brains and atrophied their bodies.

It may have been stupid, utterly dangerous and life threatening but the child-like exuberance, the innocence, devil may care, fun loving (?), laugh at the odds attitude was something to behold. They took it to the edge and stuff the consequences. It could be argued that they lacked common sense and had no thought for the possible consequences. Even these late teens, early twenty something Abs were like children...which they were.

Who are we to judge....

I was at Daly River staying at The Mango Farm on the banks of that ancient river about 30 kilometres downstream from the famous Daly River Causeway.

A group of us were sitting around a fire, the embers dying, telling anecdotes of our travels thus far. Laughing at each other's experiences. One of the blokes had a brother (or in-law...I can't remember which!) living on an old mission some 170 kilometres west towards the coast. He'd just spent a couple of days there. It was a beautiful spot apparently, now a "no go" area unless you had special permission and paid the required fee. Several "Whiteys" lived there helping to manage the Ab attempt to recapture the past to live as their fore-fathers had done while trying to run a commercial beef cattle station.

The experiment was failing....dismally!

The bloke's relative was a Mechanic who was trying to instil a basic knowledge of everything mechanical to the Abs and what maintenance work was necessary to ensure continued reliability of the farm fleet. It would appear that this simple (to us) philosophy was beyond the comprehension of the tribe. But it was a "dry" community, a joy to behold. Every one was happy; the kids were great, clean, well fed and respectful. A real sense of community spirit, a kinship, a feeling of family for which the Abs hold high regard.

A real pleasure to visit....but.....

But on Pension Day.....

No one was allowed to take alcohol onto/over the tribal land/onto the former Mission/Station land. No one was allowed to drink and drive or be drunk driving a vehicle on this land for fear of having their vehicles "compounded". Consequently, the vehicle compound was full of late model 4WD's, Landcruisers, Patrols, and Troopies. When the compound was bursting at the seams, the impounded vehicles were transported out to Darwin to auction...late models, low kilometres, a few scratches....and the process would be repeated on a 3-month cycle.

The purchase and sale of low mileage 4WDs kept the Mechanic busy. The Government supplying a never-ending assembly of new, brand new 4WD vehicles at no cost to the Ab Community so the story was told!

On Pension Day night the men would cram into whatever vehicles were available and steal into Daly River for a "skin full". A convoy of thirsty drinkers, all vehicles crammed with bodies making the 400 odd kilometre return trip to the local "Rubbity". They'd load up with slabs of beer for the return trip tottering on drunken legs, drunken men now sitting on roof rack trays, hanging off side steps or sitting on the bonnet having been displaced by the careful packing of the supplies of grog into the vehicles. They would rendezvous at a tree lined, dry riverbed just outside the border of the tribal land/cattle station and continue to drink themselves into oblivion and until all the beer was consumed.

Then, and only then, did they succumb to the effects of too much alcohol. For Abs in general, that appeared to be the major problem....they did not know when to stop!

When enough was enough.

You can only imagine the condition of that quiet, tree lined creek bed....but the "wet" will flush that away!!!

Arhhhh.....greenie Abs.....don't you love them. For 400 centuries they have roamed this vast land and acted as the guardians.....until they have a belly full of grog.....If one of the trucks just

stopped they'd transfer the provisions to another of the convoy vehicles and clamber into/onto any available space. The broken down vehicle would just be left or pushed off the road into the bush. Discarded, never to be thought about again.

Most often than not, it had just run out of fuel! In their enthusiasm to purchase the more "important" supplies of beer and cigarettes, the topping up of fuel was often, or usually forgotten about...who cares....there was sufficient vehicles for the return journey. Invariably, vehicles were abandoned at the "Drinking Spot". Who needs them; they could all cram into less number of vehicles now that the "provisions" had been expended. To return to the community bleary-eyed, smelling of stale alcohol and cigarettes and puke with some bloodied and bruised 'bruddas' from the habitual fight that would erupt sometime during the night!

Thus the brother (or in-law) mechanic was at his busiest at that time, recovering and retrieving and "compounding" those abandoned vehicles.

For some time the "Work Horse" of the community had been an old Holden Kingswood sedan, used by all to check fences, bore wells, stock and to take the kids swimming further up or down the coast, to take the women...oh! I don't know....for a drive. It didn't have any doors, bonnet, windscreen, back window, boot lid or back seat....that way you could fit more people into it. Kids perched on the dashboard, the roof, the rear parcel tray sitting out of the missing back window, standing in the boot well while the adults stood where the doors should have been. This car just kept on going....when it ran out of petrol or got bogged, they'd just walk away to do what they had planned for the day and in true Ab fashion, walk back to the community in their single file fashion.

The "Mechanic" would retrieve it to again get the engine ticking over to be used and abused once more. Its final demise occurred when one of the budding young Mechanics- in-training removed the tappet cover and to delighted squeals of laughter as a heap of them craned over the exposed rocker arms, rods and tappet springs in their rhythmic movement, the car was driven around until the engine seized from the lack of oil.

It was retired to the bush in the company of other abandoned, rusted shells.

The Ivanhoe Crossing pictured above, was, up until the construction of the massive Ord River Dam, the diversion Weir at Kununurra and the high level Highway No. 1 bridge over the Ord River, the only access from Kununurra to the west towards Derby and The Kimberley area. During anything above a normal 'Wet', which occurred at least every 3 to 4 years, Kununurra and all points north, south, east and west became impassable.

I drove out to the Causeway for a look and a possible photo shoot.

I'd gotten out of the truck and had set up tripod and camera for some shots of the smooth as silk current of water washing over the causeway/road when the air was split by the sounds of shrieks and laughter. A convoy of Troopies raced from the far side across the causeway at an incredible speed, driving a bow wave before each truck that often slipped over the bonnet of the 4WD's. Abkids were hanging out of every open window, sitting on top on the ubiquitous cargo trays with older kids even sitting on the bonnets hanging precariously onto the front bull-bars. They were often obscured by the bow wave and side spray that was forced up by the speed of the trucks.

There would have been 5 or 6 Troopies in convoy.

The silken sheen of water streaming over the road was vandalised! Gone! Eradicated!

I had to move from my position in the middle of the track as the convoy came towards me. I retreated to a safer position in front of my truck thinking that the convoy would continue towards town and that only a short period of time would be involved for the smooth water current to return to caress then drop over the crossing.

The Troopie convoy circled around a large tree on my side of the river, figures changed position from inside and outside the vehicles and then with whoops, screams and high pitched laughter from the throngs packed into each vehicle splitting the air, they accelerated back across the river.

My idyllic shot again lost!

This occurred perhaps half a dozen times as I sat on the bull-bar of my truck waiting patiently for this obvious display of fun and pleasure to end. Another chap was also standing looking at the scene. It seemed that he wanted to ford across the causeway but would not even consider it while this 'play' continued. He was a local, telling me that this was the norm, carried out by most of the Abtribes around the place who had any number of 4WD's. It was not only a tribal practise to entertain the kids and the 'kids at heart' amongst them but it was an amusing way to clean their trucks while the tribe enjoyed the effect! The local Police had given up trying to discourage the practise and it was now not uncommon to see them do this, the entire tribe participating, at least once a fortnight while ever the river water was of acceptable depth going over the causeway.

I guess it may have been an hour, perhaps close on 90 minutes before they tired of the practice.....perhaps by then every person had had a go clinging precariously to the bull bar of each Troopie being saturated by the bow wave created.....their fortnightly body wash! I eventually got that shot that I waited patiently for and am more than satisfied with a series of some 10 shots that I took!

Looking back over time I have to admit that the Abs remain supreme; even ruling over teen-age boys on the "Cruise"; Greek, Leb and Uni students seeking an entry into the Guinness Book of Records for cramming the most bodies into a vehicle and then driving it on public roads of Australia or squeezing impossibly and to some peoples' way of thinking, inanely into a Public Telephone booth.

To the Abs it's just a means of getting a lot of people, the entire tribe in fact, from point 'A' to point 'B' a little faster than the old ways. Safety, common sense and trepidation not words known it seems to them.

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28/11/99

THE CONQUERING RALLY DRIVER

I'd been in Perth for just over 11 months, staying for the first 2 months in a Caravan Park at Woodman Point on the coast south of Fremantle. During the autumn/winter months I leased a house in East Vic. Park, an inner southern suburb of Perth. This was all justified initially by: -

- The cost of the Caravan Park stay had escalated to \$125/week
- The advertisement placed in the local Fremantle paper was beginning to reap dividends with work coming in at a regular rate which would off-set the added expense of leasing a property for a short-term of 6 months.
- The amount and type of work that I was doing meant that it was extremely difficult to pre-fab or set up anything while I was still in the Caravan Park.
- I have always been paranoid about leaving the van and/or the truck full of tools for any length of time and I knew that I was to fly over east for approximately 4 weeks for the Olympics.
- With my adversity to colder temperatures, I was not looking forward to suffering through a winter in the van.

To my eyes, the supposedly fully furnished house with a large gas fire solved all my problems and meant that I could also place a similar advert in that local paper thus doubling my sphere of influence.

But I guess all this mental calculation was a way of only fooling myself. You see, I had fallen in lust and as any one knows, to conduct a lustful affair in a caravan while it was perched in the middle of a caravan park was to advertise one's athletic agility for all the world to see. You cannot disguise a rocking van or censure or gag wild shouts of exultation and euphoria. Besides, she lived miles away in the outer eastern suburbs. While I was not willing to either park the van or truck in her back yard as she at the time suggested, I did compromise when I inspected the house. It was about half way between her place and Fremantle. The majority of my work was still in that area. So I signed the lease, only to have the lustful affair cool within a couple of weeks. I think she may have visited the house on three occasions and this only occurred when the flame briefly ignited upon my return from the Olympics.

Come ce, come ca!

But the house did afford protection for the van and truck having a double length carport. This did present some problems in positioning the van.... but that's another story.....so are further details of that lustful affair! But the gas heater was a Godsend during winter. Apart from downtime due to wet weather and two bouts of painful back problems that completely immobilised me for days on end, I was basically working full time. During one period of three and a half weeks, I had one Sunday afternoon off and on that day I had to purchase timber for a job that I was commencing the following Monday. I rarely got home before 6:00-6:30 PM, either picking up timber or hardware for the following day or checking out and/or pricing jobs. As time progressed, the ratio of jobs priced versus those accepted, reduced significantly.

I have never fully itemised the work done and the amount earned, but for a 7 week period I averaged \$500 tax-free for my services after all expenses, materials and tool purchases were deducted. I must admit how-ever, that during that entire period, the additional tool purchases was indeed frightening; but to my way of thinking, you should always use the right tool for the right job;

bugger the expense!

I'm sure there's a certain logic in that.....!!

I had always intended to vacate and re-commence my meanderings at the expiration of the lease and regardless of the re-ignition of the affair, I was not going to be deterred. In fact, to be again embroiled in that type of relationship (say no more!) only fuelled my desire to up and go!

The lease expired on the Monday. I received a phone call the preceding Sunday night from Trevor and Aylene who I had befriended in Darwin whilst I was marooned there. They were in Armadale, a satellite town to the southeast of Perth. Why any-one would stay at such a place so removed from Perth when they were in the area escapes me, except for the fact that the cost was substantially cheaper than those van parks in closer proximity to Perth. But I was pleased to see them again, spending 3 days there before heading further south. They had done some major purchases since Darwin. A new Turbo-diesel Patrol (the old Patrol tended to overheat and they couldn't resist the deal offered) and a new tandem axle 26 foot monster of the same brand as their old one, which was only 2 years old but they didn't like the rear entry set-up. The new van was exactly the same as the old one except mirror reverse and 2 foot longer.....allowing more room around the washing machine installed. Lovely people but their meanderings never took them off the bitumen. If it appeared that it was going to rain on the departure day, they would extend their stay. If they knew that there was major roadwork on their intended route that may cause some mud or dirt to "attack" their rig, they would detour or head in the opposite direction.....lovely people...but to my method of travel, most infuriating.

I headed south down the highway intending within a day or two to reach Busselton. A normal (read sane) person would do this "leg" in 2-3 hours! A signpost intrigued me....Dwellingup. A timber town in the Darling Ranges where the majority of Jarrah timber was logged and milled. After inquiries at the Dwellingup Information Office, I was directed to the Lane Poole Nature Reserve where bush camping was the go.

My salvation!

The way of washing away the almost residential smell that I now exuded gathered over the last 12 months!

There appeared to be only one large open area for caravan camping. Beside the Murray River. Under tall Pine trees would you believe! When all around, the last remnants of untouched Jarrah forest in the south-west area presented a majestic sight as they towered towards the sky. This was not the site for me; not only because of the Pine trees but because there was two or three other vans nestled within this 10-20 acre area.....too crowded for my liking!

I continued down the graded red soiled road spuming up a comb of fine misty red mud from recent showers. Over a causeway called "Bob's Crossing" (how original and idiomatic!) following the further bank of the river until the road petered out in a roundabout. About 16 kilometres. I passed several designated campsites but as appears to be the norm in a lot of WA National Parks, the formed "indents" were only large enough to park a vehicle. You then manhandled your tent and belongings down a track to a clearing on the riverbanks with no thought given to van owners brave or silly enough to venture this far into the reserve.

Luckily there were two young CALM officers working on erecting more timber posts to form these regimented parking indents. I immediately went on the offensive complaining about the lack of larger van-size indents. They were most apologetic explaining that they rarely if ever had had this

problem before as all van-pullers stayed up at “The Pines”. There was however another spot called Yarragin almost opposite but up the river a bit more that would take my van and truck and where I would more than likely be left undisturbed for however long I intended to stay. There was also another spot about a kilometre further up from there which according to them, was about the prettiest in the park. A large splash pool, cascades and tall jarrah trees. Unfortunately it was barricaded off at present with maintenance planned before the Christmas “rush”.

The young, pretty Kiwi Officer also recommended two further spots, extremely secluded amongst tall timber on the banks of the river about 60 kilometres further up into the Reserve. They were accessible if you didn’t mind going on a “goat track”.

I thanked them and said I’d check out Yarragin first. I retraced my tyre tracks back to “Bob’s Crossing” and snaked my way up the farther bank for about 12 kilometres.

A beautiful spot.

While the indents were indeed larger and could accommodate the truck and van, they too were intended only for vehicle standing with camping facilities about 50 metres away down on the river bank. But what the hell. Secluded, isolated with a cacophony of bird calls. Slow deep water as the river elbowed around a thickly wooded bend.

I set up camp taking up three car spaces and limiting the “turning circle” and access into four others. Had lunch, went for a walk along the riverbank and was setting up the BBQ when two yahoos roared up in this beat-up old Toyota. Mean looking buggers. Young. Tattoo covered. Long haired gits. Loved fishing. We spent about two hours fishing together without even getting a bight. Except for the ducks.

They were very apologetic saying that they had been there at the same time yesterday and had caught 5 fish including two trout; all edible size!

Bloody hell...overfished...or worse still...fished out just as I get there!

After a cold night, an early breakfast, a river bank walk and a ‘photo-shoot’ with mist still hanging heavy over the mirror smooth surface of the water, two kids and two dogs rattled up in a decaying Ford Laser asking if I’d seen a green 4WD come past. They rattled away only to return about half-hour later with what seemed half the population of Perth.

The decaying Laser disgorged the lanky quietly spoken man, two hyper-active young boys with two huge dogs of similar nature; a green 4WD emptied of a woman and two young screaming prepubescent girls; a formerly white Commodore station wagon out of which stepped a demure, almost apologetic thirty-something woman with a lovely smile and a trim figure who was almost bowled over by two impatient boys of similar age to the other two and two bounding dogs intent on telling their companions, the other dogs and the whole world that they had arrived.

The ducks that had glided up and down the river had disappeared and the former cacophony of birdcalls were replaced with the excited screams of exuberant youth and the constant barking of dogs!

I made myself a cup of coffee and hunkered down under the awning to watch the slow procession of the adults as they walked backwards and forwards from their cars up and down the incline to the river bank ‘flats’ with their goods and chattels, constantly being followed by the pack of dogs sniffing out the surroundings and my presence. The six kids by this stage had forced their authority

and grabbed Boogie Boards, a Paddle Ski and wet suits and were determined to muddy the clean waters of the stream by digging up the banks to throw clods of dirt at one another. The quietly spoken guy and the demur thirty-something 'good-looker' constantly proffered their apologies at their intrusion every time they took another load of gear from their vehicles to the camp site.

The other woman was almost rude in her reticence neither acknowledging nor attempting conversation.

After some time it appeared that the guy and "sour puss" were a 'couple' owning two of the boys and one of the girls while Miss Friendly (and getting better looking at each turn) owned the rest. She set up her own tent and cooking pit and was the sister of the bloke. Married but her husband had to work but would turn up with others for the weekend!!!!

Oh Shit no!!!!

It took them over two hours to set up to their satisfaction. The kids all that time played and screamed, fought, cried and laughed up and down the river while the dogs now having sorted out the hierarchy, raced up and down the bank supporting the general mayhem with their barking.

And it didn't seem to settle down until well after nightfall.

I was fast coming to the conclusion that the remote spot some 60 kilometres further into the Reserve as recommended by the CALM Officers maybe the go.

I awoke early the next morning around 5:30 AM just as the dawn greys the night light with mist hanging heavy across the mirror surface of the stream. I threw a line in and walked up and down the banks hoping to capture the pure beauty and peacefulness of the place before the dogs and kids pierced the serenity with their exuberance.

I took some photos to re-assure myself that this spot was quiet beautiful and that my choice to originally stay for several days was indeed justified.....before the invasion storm "hit the beaches"!

Again no bites.....

I took that as some type of obtuse omen and before the tribe broke the morning silence and magic of the place, I had had breakfast and was on the "track" heading south and further into the forest looking for that illusive campsite.

I never found it and after back-tracking and going down "fork-tracks" that were little more than bushfire access goat ruts where to turn around meant going further on until you could find another fork-track or level ground of brush only, I settled on a grassy flat area right on the banks of a stream that did an abrupt U-bend at that point. I settled in and stayed for two nights completely undisturbed by another human being but accosted by a chorus of birdcalls in the mornings and evenings and sharing the green grass with wallabies at sunrise and sunset. An occasional snake and a Monitor Lizard or two checked out my presence, seemingly unperturbed by my intrusion. The fishing wouldn't set the world on fire; only landing a few poor excuses for "fry-pan size" which I set free.

I had no idea where in the world I was though and while this didn't perturb me that much, I knew that fuel could be a problem if I got 'totally' lost and was having trouble finding my way out!

Leaving there on the third morning took me almost two hours and three unhitchings of the caravan before I managed to manoeuvre the rig back onto the track facing in the direction that I wished to go.

I only had a vague idea of where I was and I was just heading in a general southerly direction towards Collie. I imagined that this was the nearest “big” town. I ran out of LPG about 20 kays further down the track just as I emerged onto a well-graded dirt road that was obviously used by timber Jinkers. Again I headed south knowing I now had only a range of about 100 kays of petrol left. Every “major” intersecting track lacked any form of directional sign and I was starting to think of what alternatives there were when a sign painted on the trunk of a tree with a directional arrow indicated an overgrown track heading for Harvey. If my position was within a bull’s roar of where I thought I might be

according to my map reading abilities, then Harvey was half the distance that Collie was!

And besides, you cannot rotate a directional sign painted on a tree trunk regardless of the condition of the “track” it points to!

So onwards I went, suffering scratches down both sides of the truck and van, rolling over young saplings which indicated to me that this goat track had not seen any form of traffic for several years. But I had to continue, as there was no chance of turning around and backtracking.

Just as I was beginning to think that I was driving further into trouble with no hope of any-one spotting me even from the air as the forest trees around me had become quite dense with the canopy all but blocking out the sky, I emerged onto a similar forestry road that I had left previously.

More than likely the same bloody road with this goat track just cutting out a couple of bends!!

I turned right for no other reason but that I was right-handed and within 5 kays came to the usual same looking intersection except this one was sign-posted. I was heading in the right direction for Harvey.

No mileage indicated, but this road looked relatively “used”.

I’d been chugging along doing my usual 40 kph enjoying the denseness of the forest, the individuality of the trees, the occasional darting flight of some bird in front of me when I noticed that all tracks leading off into the bush on both sides of the road were “taped” off. I continued to chug along oblivious to everything but the bush around me and the quick glance at the road ahead when this car came hurtling towards me. Full throttle, four wheel drift out of the bend, a spray of stones and a mist of red mud flaying out behind it. Lights on full beam. Six driving lights roof mounted glaringly bright even in the middle of the day. It passed me at an acute angle, engine whining.

Luckily I was on the outside of a right-handed bend.

I’ve always been in awe of the way those Rally drivers attack the dirt roads and I guess I was still savouring the sight of this car sliding around the bend towards me, not thinking I guess, of what this all meant when another one screamed and illuminated towards me!

I came out of a bend where the road dipped down into a culvert crossing and climbed up to another left-hander at a crest. Another two cars were now evident. One just coming over the culvert, the other sliding around the left-hander and the crest.

I now started to wonder what was going on but as there was no areas where I could pull off the road safely, I continued on, albeit a little slower. A little more alert. A little more aware.

I inched over the crest almost IN the deep storm water “gutter” on the side of the road. Entered a slight left hander than swung into a lazy right hander that showed a straight stretch of road ahead heavily timbered on both sides.

With a valve bouncing roar one of those blighters overtook me on the apex of the right-hander showering me with pebbles, rocks, stones and a thick layer of red mud mist.

I almost died on the spot. I’d been looking attentively ahead.....forgetting about anything “going my way”!

The road crested again with another straight ahead. This time I saw the blighters coming up behind me. Lights blazing. Engines screaming. Cocky combs of fine mud mist spewing out behind them.

They overtook me as though I was standing still.....bloody hell....I was!!!

Almost axle deep in the storm gutter beside the road.

I was now shaking; wondering what the bloody hell I was to do. I couldn’t stay where I was, I was too exposed! But I felt to continue was just as bad as the road “roller-coastered”, twisted and turned with little width to move and still no-where to be able to get right off the road.

I inched back up onto the camber of the road and continued on. Eyes glued to the road ahead and both external rear mirrors.

I came down into another gully and culvert crossing where the road flattened out somewhat with a grassy verge where I could pull right off the road. Two Cops leapt out from trees on both sides of the road and flagged me down and directed me onto the grass verge.

A big bugger strode towards me waving his arms about. He held a small radar pistol in one hand.

“Where the effing hell did you come from? Didn’t you see the tapes across all the off-tracks? Didn’t you see the effin’ signs about 10 kay back prohibiting all traffic down this section of forestry road? Why the effin’ hell did you ignore them? If ya going to effin’ Harvey, there was detour signs back there? Do ya effin’ know what ya drivin’ in the effin’ middle of? What are ya? Effin’ dense?”

I should point out that he was not saying ‘effin’ but I can sympathised with the sensitive ears of some back home who may take the time to read this story!

This tirade continued as he crossed the road towards me. I guess the astonished look on my face and the whiteness of my complexion which signified the onset of shock, tempered his continued rage and aggression. His young female partner was circling the truck and van, hands on hips.

A little quieter, “Son, ya smack dab in the middle of effin’ Rally Australia! Didn’t ya effin’ know that? Look at the effin’ TV to-night, ya likely to be effin’ on it!”

I climbed out of the truck tentatively with every limb shaking so it seemed to me to show my non-aggression and explained to both Officers how I came to be on this forestry track. They gave me the time to tell my story. The previously enraged Officer began to smile as he must have realised that I was near shitting my pants long before they pulled me over.

“This stretch of 15 kays is not an Official race section but is being used as the access road to the marshalling points for the forestry sections which are competitive points sections. But as this road is a 4 lane highway of smooth bitumen compared to what they will be driving on, they’re using this as their warm-up track. But there are speed restrictions of either 70 or 100 along this road that they have to comply with. The navigator in each car has the information down to the metre where these restrictions apply and we’re here to “spot” their speeds to ensure they do comply. If they don’t, they can have points deducted or are completely disqualified from the forestry sections ahead. Effin’ hell and you are right in the middle of it.....ya bloody lucky.....ya could have caused an effin’ major!”

I was relaxing. Getting colour back in my face. I’d stop shaking. I lit a cigarette and offered the pack. They both lit up.

“Bloody hell! Under no circumstances were those guys doing under 70 or 100 when they were coming towards me or overtaking me! They left me as though I was standing still and gave me a right rare shower of stones and mud.....”

By now both of them must have seen the funny side of it...I still had to!

He walked away up a sidetrack to his Police 4WD that I hadn’t noticed up until that point and he spoke into a two-way. He came back laughing.

“Ya know what, two other radar check-points have them effin fudging the speed limit. It could be that this is the first effin’ time that a private entry drivin’ an effin’ 4WD and towing an effin’ caravan has ever won a speed check section of Rally Australia!”

“Wait here for a while until we can tell you it’s safe to go....Harvey’s only about 20 kays further on.”

I waited for about 20 minutes watching them both lurking behind their trees aiming their “hand-holds” as about another six or seven rally cars screamed passed in both directions before he sprinted back across the road to tell me it was safe to proceed.

He took another of my smokes and laughing, congratulated me on my “win”.

He must have radio-ed ahead as several cops and/or official looking guys in yellow safety vests emerged from behind trees to wave at my passage. I was still shaking but at least I could see the funny side of it.....funny but foolish.....funny but possibly lucky.

I entered Harvey and filled up with LPG and petrol. I had another 10 litres of petrol left which would have given me only another 30-35 kays range. No way would I have made Collie!

Harvey by the look of the place was normally quiet, a backwater sort of hick town but on this day it was a hive of activity. There was hundreds of white Landcruiser 4WD’s with obvious Telstra origins with Rally Australia stickers plastered on, officious looking Officials, wheeled Canteen caravans, enclosed dual-axle trailers large enough to accommodate the rally cars and spares, a couple of large semi-trailers with big-rig Rally emblems emblazoned in bright colours, in fact the whole bloody circus was in town.

And spectators lined the main street. All heads turned to watch my slow progress through the township. Wondering perhaps who the hell I was.....I thought of giving my best Queen Liz upright,

rotating hand wave and Nicholson leer.....well.....maybe not!

I tootled out of town heading south on the main highway heading for Bunbury. At every opportunity where there was a gap in the approaching traffic, Rally Cars overtook me flashing their lights, tooting their horns and waving their arms out the windows....Navigators and Drivers alike.

All with smiles on their faces.

About 3 kays out of town there was a large sign indicating Rally Australia cars were to turn there for Stage 3 of the forestry section....road closed to all other vehicles.

I was thinking of turning in.....winning another section of Rally Australia would ensure my picture in the paper, my victory televised worldwide.

I tootled passed, enjoying the forest, the birds darting across my path, the individuality of the trees.....

pcb©

22/11/00

CARNARVON CAPERS

In every little hamlet, village, backwater 'burg', sleepy hollow, town or city you will find one. Down the entire length of the western coastline from Darwin to Cape Leeuwin. They could be insubstantial 'little' things that bend, creak and complain at your passage over them. In some, Mother Nature and time have reduced them to nothing more than skeletal remains sticking up out of the water.

Others have stood the test of time and tide and safely serve the fleets of Cray and Fishing Boats that ply these waters. Others will accommodate Coastal Freighters and ocean going monsters while two in particular have outlived their usefulness and ply their beauty merely to the Tourist trade having become icons of by-gone eras.

But regardless of their current status or usage and their state of repair, they are like magnets drawing the local and tourist landlocked Anglers and 'Gawkers' to their hardwood planking.

The ones that stand remembered are those of substantial size, a tribute to the skills and ingenuity of men of by-gone times. Collectively, they may have taken a forest or three of huge Jarrah and Karri to construct, but you cannot walk their lengths and not be awe-struck by their sheer size; their weather-beaten grey bulk; their regimental and practical design; their clean, bulky but strong lines.

Those that I remember with wonderment are at Derby, Broome, Carnarvon and Busselton. They are

all 'finger' Wharfs, varying only in their length, height, straightness or curvature and their width. The two former ones are still used commercially and serve the local fishing fleets, Navy Patrol boats and Frigates, small coastal Traders and ocean going grain and livestock Freighters. Yachties use them as moorings for safe anchorage, to stock up on supplies and fuel and as a respite from the open. The one at Derby is situated for want of a better description, at the mouth of a wide muddy river towards the base of the King Sound actually miles from the open sea yet still subject to its fury as the Sound though long, is quite open. The Wharf gently arcs out from the shoreline before straightening and running parallel to it. It is wide and solid enough to take live-stock Roadtrains for its entire length, but the beauty of it can only be appreciated when you compare the high and low tide variations. The tidal surge has a normal 13 metre fall! On a 'King' tide this may exceed 15 metres! The speed and sheer volume of water that races through the huge numbers of spindly legs and cross-bracing members is astounding. The volume, weight and power of this daily water movement almost defies the imagination and as this area would have metres thick silt, the lengths of the spliced legs and supports truly amazing! You could only fish the change of tides as to do so on any other occasion when the waters are swirling past you, would mean that you would have needed a sinker of comparable weight to my truck to keep the hook and bait on the bottom!

Or anywhere near it!

I heard stories of the "Monsters" caught off this Jetty, but I never saw a single fish of reasonable size landed while I was there!

The Wharf at Broome reaches out from one side of a crescent Bay, being relatively straight for most of its length before doglegging and widening out into a considerable platform. Unlike the waters of Derby, the sea around this Wharf is crystal clear as the open ocean is only sand spits and reefs away. The bottom is sandy and while the tidal surges are not as massive, they too have a 'peak' that is incomparable to anything 'Back Home'. I guess because it is in close proximity to the open sea and in an open bay, the tidal surge while strong does not hamper the art of fishing as much. It is an extremely popular fishing spot for tourists and locals alike; its only drawback being that it is a fully commercial working dock and on several occasions when I ventured there for a fish, the outer "doglegged" extremity was closed to us land based Anglers. The Navy too, seemed to have a continuous presence with Patrol Boats and other craft coming and going. I went there on several occasions with the Fisherpersons almost shoulder to shoulder catching little; but a 'Carnival-like' atmosphere pervaded the air. I saw some big fish landed and hooked onto, several by me. But my light gear meant the bringing up of these fish onto the 'planking' an almost impossible feat! I saw some-one almost walk the length of the jetty hooked onto something big, forcing it along its length where everyone uncomplainingly hauled in their gear so that one could 'walk' your catch towards the end of the jetty and onto the beach in an effort to land them! In fact I did it myself to no avail.....the normal rig of the locals up here is usually 100-150 lb hand lines! Something my rod and reels would not accommodate or withstand without failing. I have watched as Dolphins grinned mischievously, making eye contact with you as they 'trawled' the length of the wharf; as schools of large GT and Mackerel sped through, playing with your lures, at times tossing them out of the water but never 'going after them'. Rangers were constant 'Visitors' along the length of the wharf, checking on 'Bag limits', size and the method of fishing.

Early one morning I was standing beside an Irishman who had two hand lines out which is not allowed up here apparently. A Ranger ambled over (it must have been around 6-6:30am!) and in a friendly way suggested that he haul in one of his lines as he was only allowed to fish with one. The Irishman with typical Irish logic attempted to explain that he had only one line out.....'one on t' surface; one on t' bottom as I don't know where t' bloody fish are!' This train of logic continued for some time. I thought at first that he was just 'spinning the Blarney' but as the exchange continued, it became obvious that he thought he was correct in his stance and the Ranger was 'just

an instrument of a corrupt and overbearing Government, bent on cowering the little man'! He eventually but sulkily hauled in one of his lines and as the Ranger slid his "Fine Book" back into his pocket and ambled off, he continued his tirade against 'Officialdom and the plight of the Little Man.'

I could see the possible reason for the continuation of Hostilities 'back home!'

The two 'Finger wharfs' at Busselton and Carnarvon are no longer used as commercial docks. The large grain and ore Carriers are now relocated to more sheltered and deepwater ports constructed up or down the coast and these magnificent structures have fallen into disuse and disrepair. It would appear in both cases that the tying up and mooring of boats of any size is illegal alongside these wharfs. Both are registered on the National Trust and attempts are evident to replace and repair rotted and damaged sections. One entire section of the Busselton Wharf was destroyed by fire late '98/ early '99 with moves afoot to begin the slow process of raising sufficient funds through Government and Public donations to repair them to their former glory. The Busselton Wharf is purported to have been 4 miles long before its length was substantially shortened by two separate fires; while Carnarvon is only ¼ that length. Both have a rickety railway line for almost their entire lengths and booths are located at their bases manned by volunteers to collect 'a golden coin' to enable you to walk or ride the small trains almost for their entire lengths and return.

It is a 'must' for all Tourists!

I ventured out onto the 'extremity' of the Carnarvon Wharf on numerous occasions to 'wet' a line while I lingered at Carnarvon, paying the \$4 charge to experience the pleasure. The wharf gently curved out into the Bay, a forest of giant timber piling hugely repetitive in their numbers and erectness that supported the heavy beams and bracing members. Large grey, weathered planking disappeared into the distance, rumbling and creaking disconcertingly whenever the train crawled over its enormous length. At its extremity the platform widened out into a large area, the piling extending above the planking by 1500-2000mm intended originally for the lashing of the mooring lines of Clippers of by-gone days. You could still see the burn lines etched into the hardwood. The edges of the planking were bolted with huge lengths of 300by300mm 'toe-beams' while other monstrous sections of hardwood 'flitches' lay around being used as seats, fish cleaning and tackle box platforms.

It didn't matter what time of the day or night you ventured down to the 'tip' of this wharf or in what weather, there was always someone wetting a line. I was told later that they were 'Regulars' and that you could almost set your watch by their appearance about ½ hour after the "Collection Booth" closed for the day.

They'd emerge from a battered, dust slathered, rust stained old Sigma sedan, hauling an old baby's pram out of the car boot that had been tied ajar. All their fishing gear was bundled into this rickety perambulator (OK...for yous that don't know that's a 'fancy' name for pram!) and they'd waddle the length of the wharf to its tip; to their 'reserved' position. They usually stayed out there all night regardless of the weather or the fishing conditions. They were 'generic' Orientals; their country of Origin indiscernible to my uneducated eye. Both stood no more than 5'0" tall. Small wiry men, age indeterminate. The skin tightly drawn over prominent high cheek bones. A constant squint compressed their eyes into nothing but slits, which caused the mouth to be constantly agape, their

(I'm not being racist....that's exactly what they looked like!)

A thin crooked rollie never left their lips and with their mouths constantly agape, seemed to perch on the lower lip. For all I knew it may have been glued there! The older bloke (that's just a guess on

my part) was always dressed in a pair of filthy tattered jeans defying gravity with the waist band somewhere between his waist and crutch. An old Army belt gathered in the waistline of the jeans and was not looped through the belt line. The jeans fell over his ankles and feet. I'd say they were about 5 sizes too large for his stature. Dirty grey (?) woollen socks poked through open sandals. He had a dirty red T-shirt, again over-sized, that hung forlornly off his frame and when the wind blew he put on one of those padded coats that were popular with the Chinese masses during Mao's day....except it was of a size that a Sumo Wrestler would have found too large! A 'Giggle hat' of some dark colour was pulled down to his eyebrow line. The other guy was similarly attired in that everything he had on was minimum 5 sizes too large for his frame. The Army 'Flack Jacket' was in 'camouflage colours' but the darker blotches could have been dried fish blood I suspected and his 'giggle hat' was also Army issue...or more correctly Surplus Store bought.

This particular morning I came down onto the Jetty at about 7:00-7:30am. to see them still in their 'Reserved' position but also having taken over the entire end of the platform. They looked as though they'd been there all night. Two large Mackerel longer than they were tall were lying behind one of those large timber Flinches. They had the fish covered with wet hessian bags. Several smaller Mackerel were cut up, being used as bait lying in the early morning sun on top of this huge flinch of timber. They also had an 'oxygenating' plastic bucket in which they kept small live baitfish. Their combined gear was scattered about the end of the platform. From what I could see, they had two rods 'out' facing the northern face of the wharf, four on the 'sea end' or 'tit' of the platform and two on the southern face with lines out into the wind. Then they also had about 6 hand lines out. Massive plastic iridescent reels fully wound with heavy duty 150 lb. bright yellow line. One of the hand reels had line 'out' into the wind on which were positioned 6 small balloons about 6 metres apart, the line stretching away from the corner of the wharf for a good 300-400 metres into the ocean. They were in the process of 'rigging up' another hand line in a similar manner.

I positioned myself further down from the end of the wharf beside an elderly couple from Victoria who I had fished with the previous day. They grumbled constantly about the two emancipated Orientals not allowing them to fish closer to the end of the jetty. Where we were both situated, there were two of the brightly coloured hand lines snaking into the water between us. The two Vics had two fish between them after about ¾ hour fishing and were talking about packing it in. I caught 2 small Mackerel, giving one to the old couple and throwing the other back. This bought a comical response from the two Orientals. They both stopped what-ever they were doing, bow legs apart, back and shoulders hunched with arms bent away from their bodies looking all the world like starved Sumo Wrestlers in combative stance. A low guttural groan emanated from their throats. Their menacing stares cut into me.

I promised myself that the next fish I caught I would cheekily display in their direction before I chucked it back! Blowed if I'd give it to them for whatever purpose they intended. It was almost as if they expected my prizes!

Either that or they had no comprehension of 'catch and release' practices.

I'd just thrown back in after re-baiting when I heard the 'old Vics' shout out. One of the plastic reels was bobbling about, reeling out line, the spool captured behind the large timber 'toe-beams'. The two Orientals waddled over in their Chimpanzee gait and started reeling the thick, bright 'cord' onto the spool. There was something large on the line. I had to reel in my line as the hand line ran close to it. I turned away after pulling my line in to give them a bit of 'elbow room' as they were struggling to hold the spool. I glanced at the end of the wharf as I turned. One of their rods was arching, releasing line at a frightening rate, the whizzing sound of the 'drag' and line loud enough for me to hear! I yelled at them and pointed in the direction of the rod, which looked comparatively new when viewed beside their other rods and 'egg-beater' reels. An expensive 'Overhand

Baitcaster' Reel worked out the line. They seemed transfixed, unable to make a decision on what to do. We all looked towards the rod, its length arched, straining against the 'set drag' and the rapidity of the line being released. As we all stared, the rod arched convulsively and seemed to leap from its restraining hole in the timber planking to arch out into the water, the elasticity of the line propelling it. For a moment the prized rod and reel set seemed to 'ski' across the surface of the water before its weight dragged it under.

They stood transfixed, emitting that same guttural moan before they adopted their 'Sumo Wrestling' menacing stance. They seemed to forget that they also were fighting something 'big' at the end of the spool that they were holding. It dropped from their hands, bounced and rolled and spun to drop over the edge of the wharf with a loud splash to disappear below the surface. They again adopted their Sumo stance, the guttural moans coming thick and fast. This seemed to stir them into action though there appeared little that they could do. They waddled, rolling in unison towards the end of the wharf where the rod had been standing. Both propped and pirouetted like a Ballroom Dance Couple to retrace their steps towards where the spool had disappeared over the edge. The guttural moans were replaced with high-pitched rapid 'Orientspeak'. The two seemed to speak over each other. To and fro, wobbling ape-like, jabbering away, an occasional guttural groan, a jab of the finger to one another, a Sumo stance, more jabbering as though they were scolding each other, a peering over the edge of the wharf at each location almost looking to will a re-appearance of their wayward gear.

Or so it seemed!

After a while they seemed to settle back into their normal routine with an occasional glance out to sea in the direction of the submerged rod and reel. The two old Vics and I re-baited, threw out and with stifled laughter, concentrated on our lines. Whatever had been hooked up was large and fast.

We were roused from our reverie by a shrill note, a string of high-pitched jabber. We stood up and turned towards the end of the platform and their 'reserved' position. One of the two had a big green spool in his hands, the line stretched out about 500 metres with the balloons in the distant water being ducked under the surface. The line twanged off the edge of the spool each time the little man 'dipped' the reel as he tried to ease the tension on the line. His body strained against the load being exerted from whatever it was at the end of the line, but he was gradually being forced to stumble towards the edge of the wharf. The line loudly twanged from the spool at every little movement. He screamed a high pitched jabber-stream. The other bloke apparently had been over on the other side of the platform possibly contemplating the fate of his late expensive rod and reel set. He waddled over to his mate as quickly as his bow legs would take him, to wrap his arms around the other's waist, straining with his own body weight to halt his advance towards the edge of the dock and the 5 metre drop into the water. At that moment the hook must have 'hit' a nerve or something in the fish because it seemed to take off. The 'jabberspeak' reached a panicky pitch as they began to 'ski' across the wooden planking looking as though the two of them were glued together and being dragged by some mystical force as it was hard to discern the fishing line. Their voices rose to a crescendo as they were drawn close to the timber toe-beam at the edge of the planking. They skated about 4-5 meters across the hardwood planking issuing loud, heart rending screams like a battalion of Japanese soldiers on a Banzai attack.....or it could have been that their feet were being speared by a thousand splinters from the weathered planking.

I and several other Fisherman along the wharf started to run to their aid just as they reached the toe-beam where the one holding the reel either let it go or couldn't hold on to it any longer. With an almighty twang of released fishing line, the spool catapulted in a huge arc to land in the water some 100 metres from the edge of the wharf. The sudden release of tension caused the two 'Simian-men' to fall in a heap at the plankings' edge still jabbering panic-stricken to one another. The plastic spool

sped across the surface of the ocean leaving a bow wave behind. A balloon occasionally bobbed to the surface then disappeared, growing smaller as the big(?) headed out to sea.

It was one of the funniest sights I think that I've ever seen.

The two men picked themselves up rather sheepishly, now jabbering quietly but accusingly at each other. They both bowed to those of us who had reached their position, offering to lend them a hand. It was hard to tell if they smiled their appreciation or it was just their normal squint-lined face. We returned to our various positions, joking and laughing between ourselves, sure of what we said not being understood by the two who became the butt of our asides.

Up and down the wharf the fish had gone off the bite; they not the only ones who had had their wits scared out of them! One of the two little men disappeared, waddling down the length of the wharf as fast as his bow-legged gait could take him.

Whatever the type of marine life they had been, they were obviously big, fast and powerful.

The old Vic couple and I decided to leave at the same time and we wandered down the mile wharf together reliving the 'Comedy Capers' moments that had occurred within a 30-minute period. Just as we reached the end of the wharf near the still closed, volunteer-unstaffed Pay Booth, the "Missing One" drove up in the earth-coloured Sigma. He jumped out, swinging an armful of plastic bags. We gestured in a questioning manner inquiring as to what he had bought. He thrust his hand into one bag to retrieve a new spool of iridescent pink fishing line. In a self-conscious manner and broken English he said, "250 lb....We catch big fish!"

I dreaded the thought.

I had visions of two little Orientals skiing out to sea behind some marine monster!

Arriving in South Africa in quick time!

But they were game little buggers, never likely to take a backward step!

Ahh!.... Comedy Capers indeed!

pcb©

3/1/01

ROADSIDE EXPERTS!

Since I took delivery of the van in December '96, I've done about 70,000 kilometres. Admittedly not all those kays have been with the van on the back. I'd say that the van has done about 50-55,000 kays....and with the same set of tyres still on! My paranoia about the van being 'overweight' may still be anchored in reality, but the mileage that I have got out of the tyres is pretty good. How-ever, they are showing signs of uneven wear, a need in the not to distant future for a wheel alignment. But what the heck, I'm more than satisfied so far with their performance, especially when you consider the state of some of the roads that they have been forced to negotiate.

My normal practise when I know that I will be stationary for a couple of days or more in the one spot, is to elevate the van up on the 'Stands' to take all the weight off the wheels and 'running gear'. This may have something to do with the longevity of the tyres....I don't really know.....but what the heck!

I was more or less forced to extend my stay in Albany for a longer period than I originally anticipated. Not that I am complaining! It really is a beautiful part of the world. In fact, the entire stretch of country from Busselton all the way around to Esperance would have to be up there with other great parts of Australia that I have so far negotiated; if not the best so far for beauty, diversification and majestic country-side. It compares with The Inland Pilbara, Ningaloo Reef and The Kimberley in WA (have yet to do more inland stuff and points east of here); Kakadu and general parts of NT (haven't done further south towards 'The Alice');

Lawn Hill NP, Karumba, Cooktown, Daintree, Eungella NP and small pockets elsewhere in Qld (the vast majority of the coastline is a 'Tourist con'! but due to weather couldn't explore The Reef or Witsundays) and have yet to do SA, VIC or Tas for further comparisons.

Unfortunately, this whole area is the destination for a large number of Holidaymakers from all over WA at this time of year. I was forced to stay in Albany because other camping areas travelling east were booked out. In fact, I had to change "address" from the Caravan Park at Middleton Beach to the Caravan Park at Emu Park which was only 4 kays down the road because of prior bookings!

I was lucky in fact, to be able to obtain a site at Emu Park at such short notice and was located on an elevated spot next to 'Permanents' overlooking the 'Phelbs' who were canvass to canvass on the grassy 'lowlands'. It turned out to be one of the better spots in the Park and I was accosted on several occasions by other envious 'Campers' as they surveyed my 'digs'.

I left there on the morning of the 9th wanting to get on 'the move' once again, no matter that I may have problems further down the track in endeavouring to get 'digs'. There's always a bush camp on the side of the road, down a dirt track or a deserted quarry that I can hunker down into waiting for the holiday season to be over....with its thousands of squealing kids and unfriendly (perhaps envious and nerve shattered) parents.

I trundled out of the Caravan Park after farewelling those people that I had befriended and headed for the main road to head out of town. I felt an enormous vibration through the steering wheel and a glance in the rear view mirror showed the Van rocking side to side. Damn! After all this time....a flat tyre on the Van. The road was narrow with minimal verge at this point but I pulled over as best I could and slowed to a halt.

Right on the apex of a left-hand curve.....Good one Byrnes!

Half on, half off the bitumen. Forcing cars to overtake me on the blind.....I got out of the truck as a bloke in a Holden Statesman pulled in behind me. His 'hazard lights' blinking rhythmically.

He hobbled up to me as I walked slowly around the van. Both tyres were inflated with nothing wrong with them!

"G'day.....havin' a bitta trouble? I bin followin' ya as you came out of the side street. Ya stayed at Emu Point? I own the motel and chalets opposite. Ya left wheel is wobblin' around somethin' fierce! Looks t'me like ya dun a wheel bearin!"

"Shit...I can't stay here.....cars are having trouble getting around me on the blind."

"Bugger'em! Don't worry 'bout them....they'll get by with a bit of patience. Ya got a jack? Jack up the van...I'll betya it's the wheel bearin's. I had a farm afore I rolled a tractor....bugger'd me hip....that's the way it is.....sold the farm and bought the Motel complex....but I've seen me trailers on the farm play up the same way when the bearing's bought it!"

I jacked up the left side of the van as he stood over me, relating his life's tale of woe and his experiences in similar problems with the farm's trailers. I wiggled the wheel. It had no more play than it had when I'd repacked the bearings before I left Perth....only about 3000 kays ago.

But I kept my counsel.

"Yeah....wheel bearin's had it." As he wiggled the wheel. "Same as me trailers on the farm. Ya won't be able to go too far on 'em....they likely to give up the ghost at the worst time when ya miles from no-where and sheer off the axle at the same time....then you'd be truly buggered! Best ya get new bearin's while ya here....I'll drive ya int' town and bring ya back out if ya want...no troubles t'me. Jack up t'other side and see what that's like although that wasn't playin' up like the left....but ya never know....ya should replace the lot while ya at it."

I jacked up the right side of the van as he stood near me directing traffic around my prone position. What little movement there was, was no different to that of the left hand wheel. I was just as convinced that it wasn't as he was convinced that it was the wheel bearings. I thought it may in fact be a suspension arm or a shock absorber that had worked loose.

But my untrained eyes could not see any indication of this!

He sat down beside me and wiggled this wheel.

"Yep.....definitely ya wheel bearings!"

"Well...I'm in a cove of a spot here....I'll go down the road a bit where I can get right off and have a better look."

"OK....I'll folla ya down....there's a park ya can pull inta....flat....I can take ya inta town ta get new bearin's and ya can do them there if ya like?"

He seemed to want his opinion to be believed and acted on. I resigned myself to his superior knowledge and advice...for the present.

"Righto....follow me down and keep an eye on that wheel. Beep me if anything untoward appears

to be happening.”

I drove towards the park about a kilometre away. The faster I drove, the less vibration travelled through the steering wheel. It only reinforced my opinion that it wasn't wheel bearings.

I stopped at the Park.

He hobbled towards me.

“Yeah....wheel bearing.....the wheel straightens itself out the faster ya go, but that's what it is! Same as me trailers on the farm.”

I thanked him for his help and advised him that I would drive the 3 kilometres into town to a Mechanic who had been recommended to me as the best one in town by the RAC.

“Nah....my Mechanic's the best in town.....I'll folla ya in....by all means go to the one bin recommended to ya, but I reckon ya should go to mine.”

I thanked him again.

Shook his hand and headed tentatively towards town with the 'expert' closely tailing me.

My Mechanic of choice was too busy to help or even cast a cursory eye over the van but referred me to another Business around the corner.....who happened to be the 'Good Samaritan's' preferred Mechanic. He too, was 'flat out', but could spare the time to look at the wheel if I was willing to jack up the van. He gave me one of his 'travelling jacks' and moved some vehicles from a concrete slab area for my use. He came out in his own time and checked the wheels as I related the 'Roadside Expert's' opinion. He checked the suspension and shock absorber mountings saying that there was nothing wrong with them. As he spun the left hand wheel we both spotted the bulge in the tyre on the inside wall at the same time.

The tyre had de-laminated.

He suggested that I repack and tighten the bearings while I had the chance and offered his workshop equipment and cleansing bath for a nominal fee of \$30. He'd look at the bearings and seats as I cleaned them. I rolled the tyre and wheel around the corner for a new tyre to be fitted for \$160 while I cleaned, repacked and tightened the bearings.

The bearings and seats were fine.

I left Albany around 1:00 PM tooting east heading towards Bremer Bay, wondering to myself how much the former farmer had invested in new wheel bearings when the problem was something else!

Roadside Experts indeed!

pcb©

10/01/01

OH!...WHAT A DAY!

I arrived in Esperance so that I could watch the commencement of the 'One Dayers' this time between Australia, West Indies and Zimbabwe. But I'd given myself a couple of days grace so that I could explore a bit of this area before encapsulating myself within the Van for the 1st weekend of cricket.

I decided I'd 'do' the "Tourist Coastline Drive" loop of around 50 kays. It takes you 'up' the coast (heading west), for about 30 kays, before swinging back inland to pass the 'famous' Pink Lake. Then back into town.

A beautiful stretch of coastline.....beautiful.

Clean, crystal clear water and white sandy beaches. Some tucked into little bays, some seeming to stretch for miles....4 Mile Beach....11 Mile Beach....I guess they do! Some headlands were very similar to those around Albany. Large, smooth, clean rock headlands that curved steeply yet smoothly into the aquamarine waters. Countless islands, spits and reefs.

I dawdled through Salmon Beach, Blue Haven, Observation Beach and Point that was mapped 100 years before Cook landed, till I got to 11-Mile Beach that stretched into the distance. Small surf, gutters, rips, white sand with fringes of seaweed....nary a footstep on the sand. The car park overlooked the eastern end of the beach and was up above the sand by some 20-30 metres I guessed. There was a family group of parents and two kids, 2 guys further up, a couple and maybe 2 other couples spread along this stretch of sand. But within 150 metres of each other. Where these people were situated there was two sandbanks divided by a large gutter and rip more or less straight in front of the groups. From my position above the beach at the car park, the channel and rip were easily discernible with the rip about 50-60 metres wide and quite deep reaching close towards the shoreline. The waves either side on the sandbanks would have been no more 1200mm high even in the highest sets.

A beautiful spot...almost pristine.

I'd pulled up and got out with my 'Binnies' looking for vantage spots in order to take some shots of this section of beach. I noticed several guys out in the surf.....I scanned up and down the beach and out to sea. There was a bloke about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile along the beach perched on a low exposed, flat rock shelf that was being washed with white water on every surge. The white water more than knee deep.....by himself.....miles from no-where!!

Foolish!

I scanned back down the beach to the group of people below me hoping lasciviously to spy bare breasts. There were none! Two of the swimmers had walked out of the water leaving one guy in by himself....he was in the middle of the rip....silly fellow.

There were two young blokes sitting in a battered Ford Falcon Stationwagon parked beside me, flipping dice.... I joked about their method of decision making to go for a surf....French I think....they spoke little and that was in stammering English, but we managed to communicate. An elderly couple had pulled up further down the car park and were surveying the vista laid out before them. I walked back to the guardrail to scan the beach again. The bloke was still in the rip. He was swimming unsuccessfully towards the beach against the current of the rip and seemed to be lagging.

I walked over to the elderly couple.

“G’day. I reckon that bloke is caught in the rip and in a spot of trouble.”

“Yes. We’ve been watching him...he’s swimming against the current and getting no where!”

“Well...since I’ve been watching him he’s been swept out further.”

He had now stopped swimming and appeared to be low in the water. He was drifting further out with the rip. No one on the beach below had noticed him.

“He’s in trouble!” I said to the elderly couple. A note of panic in my voice.

I sprinted over to the young blokes in the Stationwagon.

“Get your boards out, guys. There’s a bloke in the water caught in a rip and he’s being dragged out to sea. He’s in trouble!”

They looked puzzled, shrugging their shoulders in typical Gaelic fashion.

“Do you swim?” Doing the Australian Crawl charade. “Good, strong swimmers?”

“Oh!?...Oui...yes...?”

“Get ya boards out....” I went through it again. They jumped out of their car. They seemed to get the drift of my urgency.

“Get ‘m out...you gonna save a life...hurry....quick, quick!”

“But...er...they are not...er...surfboards....yes...er....we windsurf, yes?”

“Do the boards float?”

“But of cause....er...yes?”

They rushed to the rear of their van to unzip the boards from their protective bags. I raced over to the elderly couple looking out to the head just visible in the water.

“He’s in strife all right!”

I explained what I had done in cajoling the young blokes into action as I headed for the track that wended its way down to the beach. The old girl beat me to it with a surprising burst of speed. The old bloke hobbled behind. As we descended the ‘tyre-step’ staircase which she nimbly negotiated (much better than I; I may add...she had to be in her late sixties!) she looked back at me and yelled that she couldn’t swim.

“At my age and condition, I ain’t going in that far after him either!” I replied to her back.

I looked up at that moment. He’d drifted 300-350 metres out and had limply raised his arm....and his head disappeared under the water. I sprinted along the beach shouting at the small group of people that a guy was in strife in the water. I picked out the strongest, fittest looking guy there.

“Do you swim? Grab that kid’s boogie board and go out and get him.”

I was always good in an emergency....volunteering some one else's services in a crisis....bossing people about....no.....organisational skills is what I'd call it in hindsight!

The healthy young 'Bodybuilder' did the Gaelic shrug.

"Er...what?....I swim?...yes?"

By this stage we'd all gathered in a group, some yelling, others talking over each other while looking out to sea at the struggling swimmer. Hands shading their eyes from the sun and glare.

"Shut up!" I yelled. I turned to the 'Bodybuilder'. Pronounced slowly and decisively.

"Are you a good swimmer? Is anyone here a good swimmer?"

The 'Bodybuilder' replied courageously, "Yes...I swim...er... good...yes?"

I grabbed the boogie board and was about to fling it to him as the two young blokes sprinted up to us carrying the base-board of the wind-surfer between them.

"No matter....Can you swim OK?" To the young French blokes.

One was taking forever donning a wetsuit...For God's sake! Some one shouted out, "He's really in strife...he just raised his hand again!"

A woman started yelling. Hysteria edging her voice.

"We didn't see him....he went in the water with those two blokes...we thought he was with them...he's gunna drown!!!"

I turned to the young French guy.

"Now you're a good swimmer, yes?"

A nervous nod of the head.

"Go out with the rip...it'll be faster and at the same time keep ya eye on him so you don't go too far past him...yes?"

Another nod.

He walked tentatively to the water's edge and tiptoed in giving the appearance that it was cold. It bloody well was but I didn't think it was the time to worry too much about it!

I returned to the group who were now in the throes of absolving themselves of any responsibility for the bloke's life after having taken a consensus amongst themselves only to find that the poor guy was by himself and not attached to anyone within the other groups. I turned to the other French guy at the same time asking if anyone had a mobile. I gave him my keys asking him to race up to my truck to retrieve mine, unsure whether it would work though.

The guy on the board quickly negotiated the rip. No waves were breaking in this area, but he passed the guy in the water by a country mile having to turn and paddled across the rip and then back towards the shore to get close to the now clearly distressed swimmer. He got to him and slipped into

the water and with some effort hauled the guy onto the board. With minimal help from the prostrate figure, he paddled, towed and kicked across the rip into the area behind the breaking waves. He tried to pick up waves in the zone and eventually after several attempts surfed into the beach.

The elderly couple had taken over the organisation and what treatment may be necessary. I was staying out of the way especially if mouth to mouth was needed! The guy slumped to the sand and lay motionless, his chest heaving alarmingly. The young French bloke beamed at his 4 seconds of fame amid applause from those gathered at the water's edge.

The guy was German, late 30/early 40's, almost bald, wiry, skinny, a sun-starved body, a limp, blond Zapata moustache streaking phlegm and salt water, an extremely reddened face, mucous or whatever streamed from his nose. He shook violently, obviously in shock but no one offered a towel or whatever to cover him. I scooped up a bath towel that no body seemed to own that covered a pile of clothes that no one claimed and hung it around his shoulders. He said in halting English that he was all right although at one stage he thought he was 'forked'.

Just then a blonde haired woman came loping along the beach. I had visions of the "10" scene with Dudley Moore....boobs bobbing in slow motion.....No....she wasn't even a "3"!! But she was obviously the hapless victim's partner! She gabbled away in German to the exhausted victim now sitting up with his head drooped between his knees still gasping for air....a "10" far from his mind!

I went over and shook the young French guy's hand. He beamed, showing that he felt good about his act of bravery.

"Well done...ya did good....thanks!"

He beamed again hoping, I could imagine, to turn to the TV cameras mounted, crowding the guardrail of the car park above. But my mobile was out of range....there was only us.

About 14 on the beach to reward him for his valour.

Such is fame!

I checked the German again. He took a smoke from me even though he hadn't smoked in years.

"I swum...I swum....get no-where....I go backwards...I start to tink I go out to sea....I swum....I swum.....Kaput!" Gasping between words.

"You were lucky that we noticed you from up at the car park. Nobody on the beach realised that you were in strife."

"Ya....I know....they not see me...I saw some people up on d'cliff....prayed that they see me...I swum...I swum."

I gave him a quick lesson on surfing such is my unlimited knowledge on the subject having been voted 'Life-saver of the Year'....in another life...in my dreams!

"Not big waves.....small....but d' pull of d' water.....d' rip.....she strong...ya?"

The colour was returning to a more natural hue on his face and although he seemed to still be struggling for breathe, he assured me that he was OK. The soothing qualities of his partner's cooing seemed to be settling him. I went over to the two young guys to retrieve my keys and mobile,

shaking both their hands.

They seemed to be still on a high.

I accompanied the elderly couple back up to the car park.

The fisherman was still knee deep in white water...by himself.

The two young French guys were in the water, swimming in the rip area! The hapless German had been abandoned by the throng including his female companion. For all I know, the lucky guy could have a heart attack from all his recent exertions and no one would have noticed I thought to myself.

But I felt as if I'd done good that morning.

I continued on my way, calling into various 'Tourist Look-out' verges and car parks. The road then turned away from this glorious stretch of coastline and skirted around the edge of the 'famous' Pink Lake. Depending on the mix of various micro-organisms and alga growth, salt content, temperature and sunlight, the lake can look from 'normal' to pink. To-day it had a touch of mauve about it! You wouldn't drive 40,000 kays to view it....but I took a couple of shots just to record the event....then drove on.....only slightly impressed!

Miles from no-where, scrubby bush, no houses nestled into the bush that I could see.

A warm day.

A little Terrier (A Jack Russell I later learnt) bounced purposefully along the dirt verge beside the blacktop. Miles from no-where. A cute little thing. Just past 'puppy' stage. A collar but no badge. I stopped further up the road, did a U-turn and pulled into the first bit of bare verge that I encountered. Got out a basin and filled it with water putting it down in front of the truck as the dog 'pranced' toward me. As it came closer, it became more guarded and didn't appear to want any water from me so he mustn't have been dehydrated. After a while he became friendly enough; unafraid but wary of my concerned overtures.

As I said, miles from no-where!

I picked him up. He didn't complain as I put him in the truck. He immediately marked out his spot by claiming the top of the lid of the toolbox that lay across my truck behind the front seats. He sat intelligently in the middle that gave him an unimpeded view out of the windscreen. As though he owned the 'spot'. He replied with a wag of his tail every time I spoke to him. He met my eye in the reflection through the rear view mirror as though he'd done so all his life. Turned his head to peer at some 'highlight' on both sides of the road like the original "Rubberneck" tourist.

At home.

Happy with his lot.

I retraced my route looking for any dirt road leading off the main road that may signify a house hunkered back in the bush that may be his home. None were evident after several kilometres almost back to the "Pink Lake". The dog showed his displeasure at this waste of time by laying down, resting his head on outstretched front paws, glancing up at my mirror reflection as I voiced my opinion. Relaying his nonchalance, his ambivalence at my meagre endeavours to locate his home. Just like Amber used to do...communicating with his eyes. I turned around again and retraced my

route. The first intersection that I came to led me up to the “Country Club”...read the local Golf Course. I pulled up to the Caretaker’s Cottage amid the greetings of four barking dogs. An old woman tottered out. I explained the situation; she peered into the truck.

“What a cute little thing!” She exclaimed. “But no, he doesn’t look familiar. Could be a tourist’s dog. They stop to ‘ohh’ and ‘ahh’ at some view and it’s up and off after a rabbit....Jack Russell Terrier, you know....they’ll chase rabbits till the cows come home....I can’t take him....2 of my dog’s are strays or ‘left behinds’ you know....my hub’d kill me if I took another one. There’s a Ranger, he might help....or the Pound....or the Vet’s Hospital....they’ll find the Owner if they’re still in town or are locals....one way or t’other....but it don’t look familiar t’me.”

I thanked her and drove out onto the main road again. The next minor intersection took me into a sleepy hamlet; I pulled up beside every person I saw to explain my quandary to no avail. I drove into a shabby caravan park to be greeted by a glassy eyed Owner who slurred his words and held a long glass of Coke that smelt of something more potent. His Missus emerged from the Office at his beckoning. A big woman, an obvious animal lover....you could just tell! A Park resident had two Jack Russell but upon his dishevelled appearance after a phone call from the Office, he confirmed that the dog wasn’t his.

I drove to the Vet’s Hospital after obtaining slurred directions from the inebriated Owner and carried the dog in my arms into the Office.

He peered up at me, a look of apprehension in his eyes, a sniff or two displaying his displeasure. As I got to the receptionist’s desk he must have twigged to where he was as he started to shake. A mournful demeanour replacing the confident air he had displayed whilst he had lounged in my truck.

“What a cute pup...a Jack Russell....good dogs....we don’t see them that often.” Said the Receptionist who had a ‘pushed in’ flat face like a Pug’s. She had the lean body of a Greyhound with teats that looked as though she’d weaned many a litter! “We’ve not had any notice that a Jack Russell’s been lost....could be a Tourist’s....they’re game, irrepressible little dogs....got a real spirit...but he seems to favour you...he feels comfortable with you!”

Oh! Oh!....Sure ...a great little dog....I already felt an attachment to him but....

“I’ll call the Ranger, he might have a better notion of its home.”

The Ranger was in the area and turned up in quick time. He thought it might be a ‘local’s’. He had a fair idea. He took the dog from me. I walked with him out to his truck as he put the dog in a cage that was lashed to the rear tray of his Ute. He took my particulars, asking me if I’d be interested if it wasn’t whose he suspected it might be. I toyed maddeningly with my answer as I played with the ‘cute little thing’.....

Jeez....

I’m only half way ‘round...a dog....Jeez....Bloody Hell!

Without committing myself I said that if he couldn’t find its home then to contact me....he could see the turmoil on my face....I drove away feeling depleted....

What an emotional roller coaster kind of day today had turned out to be!

MOBILE ANXIETY

I'd left Albany behind.

A beautiful part of the country. This whole southwest part of Australia would collectively be at the top of the list as one of the prettiest areas that I have travelled through.

I'd extended my stay in Albany longer than I had anticipated over the Christmas/New Year period. But this section of the coast was a popular holiday destination for 'Perthites' and those from other WA regions. All 'ports of call' in this area were solidly booked out, especially for that period between Christmas and New Year and for the first week into the New Year. Further east, all places on the coast were the holiday haunts for the 'Goldfields' populace and the huge farming communities to the north, west and east. The harvest time finished just before Christmas and depending on the Dollar value of the harvest farmers too, tended to congregate to this area at the same time. Even though it has been a couple of bad years for the crops, the farmers still swelled the numbers meaning that vacant sites anywhere were at a premium.

I bypassed Bremer Bay for want of LPG (which is a story within itself) and only made a quick detour of some 120 kilometres into Hopetoun. The neighbouring Fitzgerald River National Park where I had intended to stay was closed, swelling the dingy local CP to over-capacity and the 'bush camping' areas further along the coast to the east to uncomfortable levels. Forward telephone calls into Esperance also indicated that the local CP's there were filled to over-capacity. I could get a spot later that week, so I 'bush camped' in a Main Roads Quarry and Gravel Pit about 250 metres off the black top about 100 kilometres west of Esperance.

The 'Off Road Rest Areas' in this area were only extended, widened gravel verges to the main road and unsuitable for any proposed extended stay.

The countryside was undulating, rolling hills of wheat and sheep farms. It was extremely dry and the entire area was experiencing drought conditions not having had rain for twelve months. It apparently during a 'normal' season has frequent summer rains and typical of Australian conditions experienced record floods at the beginning of summer '99....but little if no rain since.

The Quarry was at the crest of a hill which gave me a panorama view to the west, north and south with the black top snaking between a ribbon of trees that disappeared over the hills to the west. I was undisturbed for the three nights that I stayed in this location. On the second night the skies darkened over with angry storm clouds from about 4:00 PM, and thunder and lightning rent the atmosphere from about 6:00 PM to 1:00 AM the next morning. There was an occasional heavy rainsquall that lasted only minutes, but the power and the fury of the wind, the lightning and thunder stormed around me for about 5 hours.

It was spectacular. I sat out on top of the truck sipping on a beer and eating a sandwich watching the fury and majesty of the storm as it blew in a 360-degree arc around me. It was beautiful. Further to the northeast, lightning strikes caused massive bush-fires to the south-west of Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie.

I'd purchased a new 70-300 lens and tried numerous times to capture the chain and snake lightning bolts as they flashed across the sky. I'd swing the camera to the south-west waiting for that flash only to have an enormous bolt discharge over my shoulder in the north-east arc. I'd swing that way only to be defeated by lightning strikes zigzag to the ground to the south-west. I gave up in disgust convinced that those photographs that you see of gigantic lightning bolts arcing across the sky are a matter of luck or are computer enhanced imagery!

A herd of cattle in a paddock nearby lowed constantly and as the electrical storm increased in intensity, their lowing amplified to panic proportions. You could distinguish individual cattle by their distinctive panic notes. The herd did not settle till the following morning.

I left that secluded 'Bush camping' spot early on the Thursday morning and headed to a 'reserved' site in a Caravan Park in Esperance so that I could watch the beginning of the 'One-Dayers' between Aus., WI and Zimbabwe. I tootled along heading east doing my customary 80 kph, 'rubbernecking' at the countryside, the dry stubble wheat paddocks, the trees, the frequent flight of birds crossing my path and wondering where a dirt track that occasionally intersected the black top might lead to. Very little traffic if any overtook or passed me by. Me in my normal semi-tranced state awed by the countryside.

I crested a hill and was jolted from my revelry by a high pitched 'beep-beep-beep'.

It took me some time to realise that it was the Mobile Phone accepting some message. Another crest, another 'beep-beep-beep', 'beep-beep-beep', 'beep-beep-beep'. Bloody hell....three more messages!

My anxiety levels increased!

I peered down at the phone resting in its cradle. It was out of range. It must be an emergency....that's four messages...I've never had four messages before....I've only been out of touch for three days.....I've been out of touch for two weeks at times without having four messages waiting for me!

Something has happened!

To my way of thinking and in the twisted logic that I'm known for I figured that to scroll out the messages at this time when I was out of range would be counter-productive as there was little I could do being again out of mobile coverage.

But all this did was to increase my level of anxiety.

'Dad's had a heart attack! How do I get from here to Sydney?'

'Mum's had another stroke! I could catch a plane from Esperance to Perth; then one to Sydney. There must be somewhere in Esperance where I could 'store' the 'rig'?'

'Lisa....something has happened to Lisa....she and Mark have had a fight? Her mother more than likely!'

‘The whole bloody family and their health’ swum around in my head fuelling my paranoia.

I had to steel myself not to grab the bloody phone and scroll out the Doomsday messages.

Again, trying to allay my concerns by telling myself that there was little I could do until I got into mobile range in any case, so I was only causing grey hair by pre-empting the contents of these messages.

Think positive.....’I’ve won Lotto?....I wonder how much and have I shared the first prize?....Bloody Hell, that means I’ll have to curtail my travels to rush home to put the extensions on! Bloody Hell! That means that I’ll be tied up for at least 12 months until I finish them before I can get on the road again!’

My anxiety levels soared.....

Think positive.....’That means that I can buy a new rig! Jeez....what should I get?’.....Bloody Hell!

My mind was in turmoil. I began sweating.

High anxiety.

Lisa, Mum or Dad. Perhaps it’s Robin. Greg travels overseas frequently. A plane crash. Dick’s had an accident on his bike. I’ll definitely get a new truck...what type? I’ll have to get the block surveyed! How much should I give Greg and Dick for the house?.....Double so that I can set up a Trust Fund for all the kids future education....will I have won enough for that?....I’ll have to start thinking about what type of Van and all the little things included that with travelling would make life so much easier....I’ll have to look after Mum if its Dad....at least I’ll be able to give Lisa and Mark a block of land for their wedding present.....what about Robin, she’s fallen over and busted her knees up good and proper...she’s had a stroke.....Rob’s done something silly.....with Phil’s dietary habits, he’s had a stroke....a heart attack?

Bloody Hell!

Don’t look at the messages.....it’ll only make matters worse when you can’t do anything! Wait until you get to Esperance where you can arrange your immediate travel arrangements.....look at the messages then.

I picked up speed. It was only now about 40 kays to town. I was doing 95-100 kph but it was a straight, wide road with gentle undulations. It was a cool day so the truck wasn’t overheating...that’s all I need....another ‘cracked head!’

I got into town and parked at the ‘Lay-out’ where the local Tourist Information Board displayed the Locality Map and ‘Points of Interest’.

I was in a lather, my mind racing with the possible ‘Back Home Emergency’.

I forced myself to calmness.

I got out of the truck convincing myself that it was not worth being in a pickle when I looked at the ‘Messages’, so I strolled forcefully to the ‘Info-board’ to get a feel for the town.

I had a smoke, wiped my mind of the paranoia and anxiety.

I got back in the truck and scrolled out the 4 messages.....

It was Phil.....wanting it recorded that he was taking the West Indies against Australia for the first “One-Dayer” as is our normal betting practice, and has been for the last umpteen years.....our \$2 bet per game!

Bloody Hell!!!!

Mobile Anxieties indeed!

Christ....bloody mobile phones can be a curse!

pcb©

14/01/01

WHO DO I THINK I’M KIDDING?

It was called Dundas, a former gold-mining town not far from the banks of a large, shallow salt lake of a similar name. It was about 30 kilometres south of Norseman on the main north/south bitumen and 2-3 kilometres off this blacktop via a red dirt track. You slipped and slid with vast deposits of this sticky red mud clinging to the tyres and which built up under the wheel arches and undersides of the truck and van as you negotiated this couple of kilometres.

Like the proverbial “shit to a blanket” after recent heavy rains in the area.

fever’ in the middle of the 1860’s except for a network of crisscrossed tracks which indicated its former size.

A bare patch of ground with a faded sign indicated the position of the ‘Pub’. More than likely a ‘packed earth’ floor that became alcohol sodden preventing the Salt Bush and Blue Bush reclamation even after this period of time has elapsed that was evident elsewhere!

(This certainly indicates the ‘pickling’ qualities of ‘rough’ alcohol...but who needs an excuse to imbibe in order to attempt a regime that would protect the body from age and degradation for a considerable period of time!....and free from both Saltbush and Bluebush!!) The whole site appeared to be positioned in a minor depression as the extent of the re-growth was Saltbush and/or Bluebush with an occasional Blue Gum, White and Peppermint Gum grafting out a stunted existence. The ground rose slightly all around where the typical open Mallee Scrub was more ‘luxuriant’ and the trees appeared to be more substantial, the scrub littered with stunted Acacia and Melaleuca Bush replacing the low growth of Saltbush. But the bush was still surprisingly open making ‘cross-country’ trekking relatively easy.

An occasional Salmon Gum tinted the drabness of the bush with its startling coloured trunk. As though the surrounding wind borne red dirt had slowly stained the trunk of the tree; or, like a person who ingests nothing but carrots in their diet, the trunks of these trees exuded through their 'skin' this hue from the gradual extraction of the red 'dye' of the earth.

I pitched camp in the shadows of Dundas Rock (clever and non-repetitive name calling chaps they were in the 19th century!) that has suffered at the hands of the late 20th century graffiti artists.....even out here! Leaving blight on the landscape that perhaps Archaeologists of the 55th century might scratch their combined heads over as we now do over the stick and X-ray doodles of long lost tribes of Aboriginal graffiti artists on similar rock faces and caves.

I'd tried to negotiate the slimy, muddy tracks to pitch beside the large lake that was indicated, 'dotted' on my map about 3 kilometres east from this point. But the state of the track worsened with 'washouts' and sodden silted 'washaways' becoming more difficult to negotiate with the van in tow. So I backtracked to the relative flat, dry and open area below the Rock formation. It was only early afternoon so I walked the network of tracks trying to visualise the layout of the town. There was nothing at all to indicate the appearance of this 'former' town except that the bush was generously littered with ancient rusty cans and kerosene tins, a rusty remnant section of a boiler and broken glass every where.

There was evidence of several fence 'runs', one of a rectangular pattern where Mallee stump posts still stood, rusted wire tying cross-braces and sheet metal sections laying on the ground used possibly as 'rabbit-proofing' to protect the Town's vegetable garden (?)

Nothing else!

The 'Bush' having reclaimed its territory.

I caught glimpses of the 'Lake' and headed cross-country towards it. I walked over a low ridgeline leaving the "depression" of the town site behind. The Trees and Acacia scrub thickened appreciably but it was still easy going as, as I have said before, it was still fairly open country and there was no grass, or clumps or Spinifex to hinder my progress. I came out onto a low knoll with a shallow gully either side snaking gently towards the lake. Wherever you looked there were the scars of 'scabbling', of de-forestation, where the sides and bottoms of the gullies were littered with disturbed clay, shale mounds and quartz deposits. There was no pits, just shallow 'diggings' into the sides of the gullies and hills, the tailings just pushed out of the way as they searched, picked and scabbled for alluvial gold.

I wanted to investigate this area further and trek down to and along the Lake foreshore but the sun was getting low and I had a 3 kilometre cross-country trek to get back to my camp. Something I didn't want to do in the dark! I was determined to return in the morning. It wasn't as if I needed to rush off to some far flung destination the next day.

But Oh!....for a Metal Detector!

I awoke about 3:45AM, well before the night inhales the threads of daybreak. When the bush is ghostly silent, still.....to my ears in any case!

I made myself a cup of coffee and sat outside under the half-extended awning. The air was chilly with not a breath of wind. I sat and watched the slow creep of light turn the bush to soft black silhouettes and muted greys. A thin layer of ground mist sent silent, lazy tendrils sliding out

seeming in search of some unsuspecting prey. An occasional nervous twitter from an early bird seemed to dash through the silence and the crystal feel of the crisp morning air. I had a quick piece of toast and was packed with my camera gear, water and 'binnies' snug in my backpack ready for the cross-country trek before the sun had a chance to climb above the tree line. But this day it wouldn't. There was an angry, grey cloudbank to the north, east and south. A fine mist spray sprinkled my face but I would not be deterred from my intended trek. I flung my yellow rain jacket over my backpack to protect the camera gear and pushed off cross-country towards the lake.

I'd hardly gone 100 metres before my 'trekking' sandals had acquired a 150 mm 'uplift' of sticky, slippery red mud.....elevated shoes the cheap way! I picked my way through the 'open' bush to the head of one of the shallow gullies that I had spied the night before.

I stopped to put on my Geologist's cap!.... and extract my pick hammer from my backpack!

I walked up away from the head of the gully along a dry, narrow, shallow creek bed peering at the deposits of accumulated silt in every minor 'drop-off'; at every exposed tree root that crossed the dry bed and on the 'downstream' side of every large rock and boulder that water may tumbled over during the rare rain periods. To my logical thinking, if this had been an alluvial Goldfield, then the 'Mother Load' would be further up in the hills....those poor uneducated and illogical thinking 'Diggers' of long ago would not have rationalised this!

I picked up several quartz stones of varying colour, from pure white through pink to blood red.

I kicked over charcoal coloured slate and ferrous perite (?) stones. I backtracked down into the gully and wandered over the scarred 'workings' of 100-year-old digs. I made a beeline for vast quantities of uncovered and discarded quartz mullock heaps, from a distance looking like clumps of scrunched-up paper strewn around a Council Dump. The gully discharged onto a wide mudflat 'inlet' of the salt lake. Surprisingly large, the water a mirror sheen some several hundred metres out. The 'inlet' was some 150-200 metres wide and long. Almost slap bang in the middle was an exposed quartz reef rearing its brilliant white 'head' out of the flat mud brown of the lake's bed.

All the banks and flats surrounding this 'inlet' were denuded and scarred by the ancient scourings of 'Gold fevered' Hopefuls.

The stories that they may have told.....of heart-break, of never seeing 'colour', of eking out several grains of yellow in this inhospitable, remote area, of the lucky few stories of success that only helped to fuel the dreams of the majority.....

I toppled over several loose large quartz stones and rocks, splitting, shattering several quartz rocks to take a gander at their 'innards'.....I wandered around the spit of the low headland and roamed up the wide, shallow gully on the other side picking up quartz rocks with suspicious coloured veins prominent in the bleached white of the stone. I kicked over several Anthills to scan through the granular debris of their patient industry, managing only to inflame the inhabitants into a seething, crawling mass of angry Bull Ants. I levered out the packed earth that still clung tightly to exposed root balls of fallen, dead trees; their trunks grey and weathered by time.....

You see....I'd read somewhere that these tricks could be employed to find that illusive precious metal without the need of a metal detector.....

Who do I think I'm kidding.....?

I wouldn't recognise a nugget or a grain of gold even if I tripped over "The Welcome Stranger"!!!!

I spent about 4 hours in this idiotic manner before my 'fever' abated and I trudged back to camp in a light misty haze to have a late breakfast and prepare the rig for travel.....up to Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie where, I'm told, even the streets are lined with gold.....the 'fever' re-ignited as a quiet rumble in my stomach!

pcb©

28/01/01

It's true.....the streets were once lined with gold in Coolgardie. At one stage, this raging frontier town was the centre of the 'fever' before 'Paddy' Hannan discovered "The Golden Mile". Coolgardie at that time was the third largest town in WA behind Perth and Fremantle (which doesn't say much I guess!). But because of the amount of traffic that was using the wide, dirty, and during rainy periods, muddy main street, they paved its entire length with what they thought at the time was useless scrap off the nearby mullock heaps. It took a visiting Geologist from England to discover that the stone, never known before to be gold bearing stone, to be in fact, high-grade gold bearing ore..... It took considerable less time for the 'locals' to rip up the road than it did for it to be originally paved!!!

True story.....

THE CROSSING

It is said that Perth is the most isolated Capital City in the World, separated from the Eastern States by the Nullarbor Plain. The most desolate, most remote and inhospitable section of country in the land.

The 'moat' kept Perth (read WA) apart from the rest of Australia for so many years and in doing so, gave the Westralians an almost 'unAustralian' sense of not being part of the Commonwealth that is still evident in their character today. They still baulk at any instruction that may emanate from Canberra or the "East", not wholly convince that such a law, while seeming just, is for the benefit of their State.

It was quite surprising to learn that the 'bitumen' was not completed between WA and SA until the Sixties. The thought of travelling across the Nullarbor prior to then was steeped in horror stories of intense heat, thirst, plague and unimaginable distance, and sudden storms that turned 'the track' into an impassable quagmire that left one stranded in mud up to the running boards for weeks,.

The stories of the early Explorers and brave Pastoralists were ones of a continuous fight for survival with many falling victim to the ravages of this crossing and this area.

Even now, it is considered one of the great adventures but with the laying of the 'Blacktop', not in the same realm as The Gibb Road, the Tanami Track or some of the more infamous inland tracks such as the Gunbarrel Highway.

But the distance and the heat are still extreme.

With all that has happened to me during my travels, the confidence with which I viewed my truck's reliability and its ability to withstand continuous hundreds of kilometres in extreme heat is somewhat jaded to say the least. It was with this in mind that I to a certain extent, deferred this 'crossing'. My paranoia ran rampant with my fears being fuelled by the abundant stories of failed attempts and misadventures that you tended to hear from fellow travellers as you reclined in some comfortable Caravan Park.

But I knew sooner or later that I would have to attempt this foreboding task.

I lingered perhaps a little longer than necessary at Kalgoorlie, blaming the televised ODI programme and the spat of days with over 40-degree heat for my tardiness but to be truthful, I was most apprehensive to begin the journey.

I had the truck checked out comprehensively even though it hadn't missed a beat since leaving Perth some 3 months previously and had negotiated some horrendous 'back trails' through the Tall Timbers Country and beyond. As it was, the Tune-up that I organised though not due, was paramount in me experiencing dismal fuel economy of the likes that I have not encountered before. But I maybe a little over-critical of the local Mechanic in that regard as I drove into gale force headwinds all the way across the 'Bor' as some Locals sardonically call it!

The 4-day weather forecast was for gradually increasing temperatures and hot nor-easterly winds being funnelled off a cyclone bearing down on Port Hedland. Even though it was predicted to be in the high 30's, staying any longer it would appear, placed me travelling in higher temperatures still. The elderly couple who I had first met in Esperance, Nev and Bev from Brookvale in their 30-something year old 12'0" Franklin and Toyota sedan, had tootled off the day before seemingly undeterred by the looming crossing!

I was a little more circumspect to put it kindly!

I'd intended to get away no later than 7:00 AM, but in my usual dithering manner, struck up conversations with those around me or to be more precise, as soon as I showed some sign of 'decamping', every-one wanted to stop and have a natter.

It happens all the time...even I seem to do it to those poor souls who show a similar vein in packing up, ready to get on the road. Consequently, I did not leave the Van Park until well after 9:00 AM and after filling up on LPG and topping up two of the Jerry Cans with petrol, I did not leave the environs of Kalgoorlie until well past 10:00 AM. Driving sou-southwest, I had the hot nor-easterly as a tail wind for once. But it was hot and fierce! The further south I drove the hotter it got.

I had intended to camp overnight just north of Norseman at a 'recognised' Off-road Rest Area beside the shores of Lake Cowan. This was a vast saltpan lake that was partially filled after the recent rains. Upon investigation, the large flat area that was the 'camping zone' was only lightly shaded by a few scraggily trees and was completely open to the fierce hot winds that blew off the surface of the lake. Even though I'd done close on 200 kays, I decided to press on, refuelling with LPG at Norseman and turning onto the Eyre Highway that traverses the Nullarbor.

Straight into the strong, hot ENE wind.

The temp. gauge rose alarmingly along with my paranoia.

I stopped twice in 80 kays to let the motor cool. I ran with the heater on full blast with all the windows down or slid open. Some-one had once told me that you could keep the motor cooler and allow greater radiator water movement by driving with the heater on. According to the temp. gauge this did not make one iota of difference to the engine temperature but ensured that the cabin interior was somewhere in the high 50's!

The ambient temperature had to be in the low 40's by this stage, making this leg extremely uncomfortable and only adding to my gravest fears!

I passed a bloke who was parked on the side of the road. A Ford F150 red Ute with a big dual-axle Island Star van behind. Both rear wheels of the truck were lying flat on the ground, like those cartoon depictions of vehicles that have given up the ghost. When the verge allowed I pulled over. About $\frac{3}{4}$ kilometre down the straight flat road. I walked back in the stifling heat to see if he was OK. He met me about halfway and was rather reticent about his troubles. His 'diff' had seized. He wouldn't ask for my help but waited till I offered, then awkwardly accepted. It took me another 2 kilometres down the road before I could swing the rig around and return to his spot. We spent about 3 hours under that bloody truck in the stifling heat putting his spare 'diff' up and under into position.

During all that time no one else stopped or offered their help with quite a few smart arses honking their horns at our predicament as they sped past.

So much for the attitude of helping your fellow traveller!

But the thing that truly amazed me was the fact that the guy travelled with a spare 'diff' just in case it was needed!

They'd bought the entire rig in Perth and were heading back to Ceduna to settle things up before hitting the road. There was no way the guy could have manhandled the replacement 'diff' into position without my help and as it was I had to use all my bits of timber and the axe handle as extra leverage to align the diff into place....he had neither timber nor axe in his possession! And his jack was useless, even though he had the weight of the van being taken by its jockey wheel and the truck suspended on the two flattened wheels. But we got it all back together between cooling iced (!) drinks from his Missus who sat the whole time under the shade of a nearby tree seemingly unflustered and unperturbed by the calamity. Knitting and merrily humming away to herself. We used motor oil to fill up the diff. Unfortunately, it just spewed straight out again as the rear seal was 'cactus'.

Seemed a complete waste to carry a spare diff that was broken too! But I kept my counsel.

I'd noticed an emergency phone about 6 kays back up the road towards Norseman and suggested they turn around and drive back to it for more professional help. I volunteered to follow them in case something else happened, say the 'diff' freezing up again, and stay until help arrived from Norseman. This we did, but on their insistence I did not linger with them waiting for the Tow Truck to arrive. They gave me their address in Ceduna and their Daughter and Son-in-Law's business address there insisting that I look them up for a meal once I reached their fair town.

I never worried about it.

But I was told later that they had waited on the side of the road until the following day before help finally reached them!

This too only helped to fuel my anxieties of the 'Crossing'.

By this stage I was buggered, hot, and sweaty and covered with grease and oil.

I stopped at the next Roadside Rest Stop, which thankfully was quite extensive and motored down to the rear area well away from the road, the 'Bush Loo', the BBQ and picnic seatings.

I filled up my Bush Shower and laid it across the bonnet of the truck to warm up....I don't know why, it was about 5:30 PM and still registering 43-degrees on the thermometer in the van. I stripped off, laid one of the blue tarps that I have on the ground, hooked up the bush shower to the rear bracket and began scrubbing off the oil and grease with some kerosene that I had in my "spare kit of tricks". Stark naked! I didn't even hear them until they came round past the end of the van! I was at the rear of the area where the cleared area reverts to a series of dirt tracks that looped and meandered into the bush. They had the entire 'formed' area to themselves, but no, some people seem to crave companionship in these places....even if he is stark naked and trying vainly to get oil and grease off his body! An ex-Ambulance. A 30-something couple from Lithgow. They had travelled across to Perth for the bloke's sister's 40th birthday. All this relayed to me as I continued to scrub off the grease. Their advice thankfully received on places that I had missed or could not see. After I passed their 'cleanliness inspection' and as I began to lather up for my shower, they tootled off back to the front of the Rest Area to be close to the loo! I took a beer up for both of them after I had finished my ablutions and had become a little more presentable...I don't know why, the woman seemed to be impressed with my 'good looks and the shape of my hands', and had a natter with them. They too were experiencing overheating problems and were losing water through a pinprick hole in the top of the radiator. According to him, pepper pored on the radiator while it was hot did the trick.

Day Two.

While I was not the last rig to leave this Rest Pit, mine was certainly the dirtiest! But I had little trouble in making it to the blacktop.

It had got down to 6-degrees that night! From a maximum of around 43!

This morning the sky was grey, the wind howled now from the southeast quarter, it barely made 20-degrees all day and drizzle and rain squalls crossed my path.

On-coming Roadtrains threw up a mist of muddy spray that obliterated my vision for some moments before the windscreen washers streaked it away. This happened with regular monotony, as the number of these giant rigs was truly astounding!

In both directions!

I passed an insignificant little sign that read 'Newman Rock'.

I passed it by several kilometres before the name twigged. A bloke at Esperance who had told me about Dundas Rock south of Norseman also mentioned this as a pretty, isolated bush spot for an overnight stop. I'd done no more than 30 kays so far that morning but what the heck at least I could

take a peek at it. It was some time before the verges again allowed me to do a U-turn and the return drive to the turn-off was about 12 kilometres my mind thinks fast! And the verges did have that sinking feeling as I negotiated the U-turn. The dirt track leading off the blacktop was about 3 kays long to the first camping Area. All along the track there were large puddles of water from the night rain but it wasn't that hard to skirt around them with only one side of the truck and van swishing through the puddles. The open area of the designated camping area afforded no view of the rock and was on a gradient of around 15° so I continued down the track until it opened up into a circular turn-around near the summit of the rock. But there was evidence of tracks leading down the shoulders of the rock onto flatter surfaces.

I walked down to investigate.

About 500 metres further on there was quite a substantial grove of trees that gave protection from the howling sou-easterly and which provided a panoramic view of a large pool in the side of the rock and valley views further out.

Admittedly only of a large saltpan in the distance but it was better than anything that the regular camp area offered. I thought that I could negotiate down the shoulder of the rock quite easily. As for driving back up over the rock face well, that maybe a little difficult. But to-morrow was another day and I basically had all day to do a bit of exploring, bird watching and spying the numbers of animals that should frequent this permanent water hole. I climbed back up to my rig, slipped the truck into 4WD and eased down the shoulder and into the grove of trees to set up camp.

Lovely!

I had morning tea and set off to do a bit of exploring.

The rock was quite large and appeared to be a single monolith of granite. In spots it was quite eroded with watershed gullies, rock pools and several small stunted groves of trees growing in earthy deposits. But around its summit it was very open and the wind howled. I'd say it was no more than 20 metres high and its base circumference would be around 1-2 kilometres. It was while I was doing this base walk that the fever broke once again. I'd walked into several small crevices (good snake country actually), and spotted several clusters of crystal clear quartz stones and pebbles. There were plenty of milk white quartz rocks and stones lying about the base but this was the first examples of clear quartz that I'd seen. I kidded myself that they were diamonds! But I kept them all the same. I came across a clear yellow stone about the size of a small bird's egg.

Eureka!

The Mother Load!

Gems just waiting on the ground to be swept up by some one such as myself.

King Solomon's Mine!

Who am I kidding?

But there was several deeply cut creek beds radiating out from the base of the rock and heading towards the saltpan that I could see in the distance from the van's position. I followed several of these for some distance, peering at the steep clay banks that were about 2 metres high and speckled with quartz chips. Looking for that elusive glint of gold! Turning over silty deposits on the beds of the creeks hoping to spy those precious granules. All I managed to do was to frighten more Roos

than I could count; cause more Emus than I had seen up till then into frenzied 'flight'; watched enthralled as snakes slithered, lizards waddled and more birds than I could recognise, shriek panicked departures from stunted bushes and small pools of water that were in the bases of these dry creek beds. I wandered back to the van about 3 hours later a 'happy chappy' but a trifle miffed as I had failed to find that 'Mother Lode' and more in exasperation, had failed to take my camera with me.

Once again!

It drizzled on and off all afternoon.

The only creatures that seemed to frequent the large rock pool was a cloud of Finches, several Butcherbirds and Peewees and some bloody Crows.

Nothing else, even as dusk fell!

No large mobs of Roos or Emus!

Not even a bloody snake!

Day Three

The next morning, I negotiated up the side of the rock in 4WD.

It slipped a couple of times but in low range gear she crawled up without too much of a problem. I crawled around past the phelb's camping area and noticed that there were tracks in the mud indicating that some-one had camped the night there.

I negotiated around/through some pools of water in the middle of the track and went around a corner of the track to see a large gleaming white rear end of a dual-axle van and similar coloured Jackaroo stuck in the middle of the largest set of puddles. Just sitting there! The Jackaroo was stuck in the largest pool with water now turned to mud up to his axles, the van in a puddle behind which was separated by a small spit from the deeper puddle but with the water level almost up to the bottom of the A-frame. I cut my motor and started to walk around the 20-odd foot van. An elderly couple was seated in the 4WD. The motor turned off! Just sitting there!

They appeared not to have noticed my approach....just sitting there seeming to be waiting for Divine Intervention to possibly turn the track and mud pools into a concrete highway!

That's what it appeared to me to be the case anyway!

I sauntered up to the Driver's window.

The bloke near snapped his head off he got such a fright at my presence! If I had had an axe I would have lazily swung it up to rest on my shoulder and given him my best impersonation of a Jack Nicholson (?) leer! But he got so much of a fright at my sudden appearance that I backed off.....he'd turned ghostly white as it was!

"G'day, in a spot of bother? Need a hand?"

"Er.....yes.....er.....where did you come from?"

I could have replied something like 'He has sent me in your time of need', but I thought this may have been overplaying it a bit!

I been camped down off the shoulder of the rock near that rock pool.

"Er.....we didn't see you there.....er.....what rock pool?"

Glory be where do these people come from and what do they look at when they stop?

"Looks like you could do with a tow, but I'd say we'll have to unhitch your van, tow your truck out frontwards and the van out backwards. By the look of the depth of the water up around your hubs, this pool is too deep to pull your van through without getting water inside it and besides, I doubt I'd be able to tow your complete rig out in any case as your truck's pretty well bogged down here."

This bought on an almost apoplectic fit from the woman who had sat motionless and white faced through my sudden appearance and narration.

"The carpets....they'll get wet.....they'll be ruined.....everything in the van will get wet and muddy and dirty. Stan.....you and your childish fits will be the death of me....do something don't just sit there!"

I explained that I would have to reverse my rig back up the track, unhitch my van as to try and negotiate my rig around his might cause the truck and/or van to slide into his rig then we'd really be in the shit. I some-how expected him to unhitch his van while I was in the process of doing all this and then driving my truck in low 4WD-gear closer towards the rear of his van. But after doing all this I wandered back to his truck to find him still sitting in the driver's seat!

I could have sworn at him!

"Ah!.....listen, I've got some steel cable with hook and eyes that I can connect onto something at the back of the your van and onto hooking eyes on my bull bar but.....arrh.....I'll need you to guide the jockey wheel as best you can as I reverse your van out can you get your jockey wheel out for us please?"

Then ensued an argument between the two of them as to who was to get their feet wet and muddy.

I walked back to my van, stripped off and put a pair of cossies on.

It was bloody cold what with that wind still blowing a gale.

I fished out the steel rope, a couple of towels and a couple of my timber 'planks'.

I managed to hook onto a section of his van's sub-frame getting thoroughly wet and muddy in the process and connected the towing eyes onto the eye-bolts that I have had always connected to my bull bar. I came around the front of his van to see him gingerly stepping out of his truck, his long trousers pulled up to his knees with a pair of sandals, grey socks still on his feet.

I almost laughed at the sight!

"No use both of us getting all wet and muddy is there?" He asked as he handed me his keys explaining that the jockey wheel was in the front boot of the van.

As I started to go through the stages of unhitching his van he nonchalantly as though he had not a care in the world told me why they happened to be in this predicament.

They were from Adelaide gearing up to do the 'Big One'. They purchased the truck and ordered the new van from Corrimall in Perth. They could have had the van delivered to their local Dealer but felt it was a good chance for them to do a shake down trip with the van in tow from Perth back to Adelaide. It gave them the chance also to visit his wife's family while in Perth. They remembered Newman Rock as they had camped here after they got married on their way back to Adelaide and well.....for memories sake, they felt it was a good idea for a re-visit in the new van. Better than a couple of swags like in the old days.....wink, wink, nudge, nudge.

I wasn't that impressed.

I filled a plastic bucket up with water from my tank and swab myself down as best I could before I got back into my truck.

It was obvious that he had no intention of guiding the jockey wheel and was intent on just swinging off one of the handles on the side of his van if need be staying as far away from the muddy pools as he could! She still sat motionless in the front of their truck. I slowly reversed my truck backwards and the van surprisingly came straight back out of the puddle without his guidance at all! I kept reversing until there was sufficient room in front for him to re-hitch without going anywhere near the edge of the pool. I asked him to get back in his truck, select 4WD, high or low it didn't matter and slowly reverse back so we could re-hitch the van.

All he did was spin the wheels at a crazy speed and spray mud and water everywhere. I have no idea why I suggested the option to get him out of the puddle.

In hindsight it was about the worse thing that I did!

He was getting no-where and just seemed to turn the puddle into a liquid quagmire the more he spun his wheels. The mud all but compacting completely in his wheel arches!

I drove my truck half up onto the dirt shoulder scrapping past bushes and tree branches as I slowly 4WD'ed past his position.

I got out the Snatch Strap and connected it to his tow-hook and onto my rear-towing bracket. I practically had to dive under the cold, muddy water or more correctly, watery mud, to connect the strap onto his tow-hook as it was obvious that he wasn't going to do it! I splashed myself with more clean water from the bucket and wiped myself down before getting back into my truck. I drove forward until the strap was fully played out, reversed about 1/3 back down its length and then flattened it. Glancing in the rear-view mirror I could see the absolute horror written across the two elderly people's faces at this violent action. Their truck did not seem to budge so I reversed again to give it another go.

The old bloke was out of his truck in a flash.

"Arh.....look.....er.....do you know what you're doing?.....you'll pull the front off my truck.....don't you think?"

By this stage I was running out of patience. I was fearfully cold, still muddy and had just about had it with this guy. My manner and speech must have conveyed the same message to him. I replied in a thinly disguised patronising way.

What I□ using is called a Snap Strap. It's an elasticised webbing that is the best thing to use in the circumstances. It relies on the elasticity to propel you out of the sticky mess you're got yourself into. It places less stress on both vehicles than if you use a rope or the steel wire. We're got more chance of getting you out with this than by any other manner!"

He seemed to sulk back to his stuck truck like a chastised child. I could see the 'old girl' going to town as he sat behind the wheel, waiting for another assault on his beloved 'rig'. It took me three tries to eventually free him from the mire.

He sauntered up to me as I was disconnecting the strap.

He stood there fidgeting, flicking mud nodules from his bonnet.

"Arh.....er.....do you think you could bring our van out for me?"

He looked at my mud-streaked body.

"Arrh.....with your vehicle? I don't think I can turn around in the track in front of my van and besides.....er.....I'll worried I might get stuck again coming out."

I was on the verge of exploding. I dropped the strap on the side of the track and climbed into my truck muttering something about hauling his van to Adelaide for him if he wanted. I drove to the entrance of the track with the highway, did a U-turn and 'bushbashed' past his stationary vehicle, ploughed at speed through the two puddles that had claimed him spraying muddy water completely over my truck, the windscreen washers working overtime. I did an about 10-point turn in the track in front of their van, reversed in and hitched it up. He, I presumed, sat in his truck as it had started to drizzle again. The van, for its size, was surprisingly light and I felt that the tow-ball weight was less than mine. I negotiated up onto the muddy track shoulder trying to miss as much of the puddles as possible, knowing that there maybe slight scratches down the side of the van from the objecting bushes as I scraped by, but it was better this than muddy water through the carpet. In the meantime, he had driven out to the highway intersection. I pulled up behind him, got out and started to unhitch his van as he came down beside me. Not once helping or offering to help! He began his normal conversational gambit of 'ering and arhing' but before he could get into top gear I cut him off.

"You can hitch up all right here while I turn around and go and get my van"

It was not a question. It was a statement!

I drove out onto the highway, turned around and drove past him up the track, stopping to pick up the snap strap as I went. He was standing beside the van, peering at its muddy appearance scratching his head. I got the impression that he had never hitched-up by himself but buggered if I was going to help him! He had to do it sooner or later!

I'd reversed my van into the "Phelb's" camping area well out of the way.

I hitched my van back up, put the kettle on to boil up some water, ran some cold water into the bucket and washed myself off. I re-filled the windscreen washer reservoir and when the water was boiled, sponged myself down and got into warm, dry clothes. Made myself a cup of coffee to try and get some warmth into my body.

I was freezing! And still fuming!

While I did all this, I saw neither hair nor tail of the old bloke.

It occurred to me that with any-one else, they would perhaps be concerned about my non-appearance back at the entrance of the track and would naturally, out of concern that I may have become bogged myself and because of gratitude, possibly come to investigate.

When I eventually emerged at the mouth of the track at the highway, they had gone!

By the muddy tracks leading back onto the blacktop, they had headed towards Norseman. I could only assume that they were backtracking the 100-odd kays in order to wash away the mud perhaps they'd be better off selling the bloody rig and staying at home! They'd still get the bloody thing dirty keeping to the blacktop if they did indeed continue with their plan.

I was disgusted...I made a half promise to myself that I would not offer my services to any further needy fellow traveller!!!!

I turned left, heading into the gale force sou-easterly and drizzly rain. The truck looking as though it had been submerged in a mud-pool.

I felt as though I had!

The first Roadhouse of the 'Crossing' was Balladonia, only 191 kays east of Norseman.

It had taken me 2 □ days to get to this point with another 1100-1200 kays to go to get to Ceduna!

It suddenly occurred to me that with 3 pop-ups of the Windscreen Wiper reservoir, 2 bush showers and at least 4 wash-downs from a full 10-litre bucket of clean water that I had taken from my water supply tanks I had used over ½ my reserves thus far!

My paranoia ran riot.....halfway across the Nullarbor and I'd run out of water.

I'd heat up the kettle full of water. This held about 3 litres of water. I'd make tea and enjoy the culinary delights that my imagination called up. I'd pour the kettle full of hot water now slightly cooled, into the sink and have a sponge down. Wash up the dishes and what not without using detergent then re-heat some of this water to use to make a cup of coffee. I would not empty the sink, for the next morning I'd use the same water re-heated for washing up the breakfast things and make another cup of coffee. The coffee did have a certain flavour to it!

At Balladonia RH, which was about 50 kays east of Newman Rock, after re-filling with gas and having an undiluted cup of coffee, I browsed through the attached Museum filled mainly with information on the downed Sky Lab which had crashed not far north-east of there.

Bev and Nev strolled in.

They'd stayed several days at Norseman after leaving Kalgoorlie.

They'd left the day before I did from Kalgoorlie. I never thought that I would meet some-one who were slower than I...I had caught up to them!

We swapped yarns on our adventures thus far.

It was they who informed me that the F150 and monstrous van was still parked on the side of the

road about 100-120 kays west of there. They left before I returned to the blacktop. I was busy chatting up the young lass behind the counter. Asking of course, about the number of scenic wonders on offer as you cross the Plain. There was not that many really in the 1200 kays distance, unless you are willing to dirt road it which was something that was not recommended what with the rain that had been and was further forecast to fall.

But I was determined to check it out for myself when the opportunity arose.

I swung back onto the blacktop after spending a pleasant 2-hour interlude. Nev and Bev were parked in a lay-back about 10 kays further on. I did not stop for fear that they had broken down. I never saw them again. Perhaps they're still there waiting for some fool Good Samaritan to stop and rescue them!

It is amazing how preconceived ideas can be easily dashed. I hadn't as yet seen hide nor hair of the famous expanse of treeless plain.

In fact, so far I'd passed through gently undulating country of Mallee bush. Sure the road was comparatively flat and bloody straight! A curve in the road called for a celebration. The undulations where crests were anywhere between $\frac{1}{2}$ kilometre to 10 kilometres apart and nary 3-6 metres high, the vegetation seemed to go in belts. You'd pass through some thick Mallee scrub which became less dense, or open wooded areas, grass areas dotted with substantial trees, or small sections of saltbush or bluebush where more stunted Mallee scrub was confined to the ridge-lines.

In fact, you didn't strike the 'geographical' Nullarbor Plain until you hit the Nullarbor RH some 175 kays east of the WA/SA border crossing.

(This Border Post had armed guards presumably to enforce the voluntary submission of banned fruit and vegetables. I reckon it was to stop any dirty, leather-coated motor-cyclists from entering WA! You know how they can pollute an entire city or State even!!)

This was because the vast expanse of the Nullarbor was further north with the road glancing its southern perimeter only.

It was sign-posted at both the western and eastern extremities and was only 18 kilometres across!!!

As far as the road goes that is!

So much for my preconceived ideas!

This 3rd day, I did about 175 kays, which is about my maximum range and besides, I worked bloody hard that morning! I was determined not to use one of those Roadside lay-backs or a designated Rest Area and at about the 150 kilometre mark began to look for any track that may lead off the bitumen. It was an old disused gravel dump some 2 kilometres off the blacktop. I walked the track before venturing down with the truck and van. There were several small piles of gravel and about a further 500 metres on the track looped into a thick grove of trees. There was evidence that it had been used in the not too distant past, but it was secluded, out of earshot of the rumbling, rattling, roaring Roadtrains and was not likely to be invaded by generator using, kid and dog owner travellers.

My kind of 'Rest Stop'!

Several Roos and a couple of Emus seemed to be miffed at my intrusion and a couple of snakes,

lizards and rabbits didn't seem to like it either! An Architect's fad of pink and grey Galahs squawked a welcome and would you believe a large flock of Peewees shrilled their claim to the area. A couple of crows, several other bird species that I could not identify and a flock of Finches signified the presence of permanent water nearby.

But I didn't feel like exploring.

I was knackered and besides, the bush was surprisingly dense.

I had a good night's sleep, hunkering down just after sunset after enjoying a cup of coffee....I'd started to look forward to this flavoursome treat!

Day Four

I did just over 200 kays stopping at Caiguna RH, Cocklebidy RH and Madura RH for fuel. The track to Cocklebidy Cave was closed due to the rain, as was the track to Eyre Bird Observatory and the old Eyre Telegraph Station ruins. The last 15-17 kays of that track was, I was told, decidedly iffy at the best of times, definitely 4WD with no van towing.

So I gave that a miss.

Again the vegetation and the road was as previously described.

But you didn't realise that you were traversing a high flat plateau until you came to the Madura Pass.

This took you down onto the coastal plain.

A relatively flat open saltbush dotted landscape with few stunted trees.

The coastline in the distance appeared to be fringed with an unbroken line of vast sand dune systems while the escarpment line that you just descended crawled parallel to the coast into the distance, its base fringed with a dense tree line. Instead of winding my way down the wide, slowly curving, descending bitumen, I followed a track that wound around the crest of the escarpment thinking that I should be able to find a secluded spot with a view of the coastal plain somewhere along its length for the night. But what spots were on offer appeared to be well frequented and were exposed to the howling sou-easterly that still blew at gale force, bringing with it scudding showers and drizzle. Before I knew it I too was descending down off the escarpment on a narrow, winding track it turned out to be the original access from the plateau above before the construction of the new road. I would have hated to have been back in those days and stumbled upon an ancient Roadtrain variant either going up or down this track!

After filling up with LPG at Madura (with tainted gas it turned out to be....and the most expensive at \$0.907 for the 'Crossing'), I continued eastward.

It was useless looking for a track that led off to the right as the country-side was devoid of any suitable sized grove of trees and just dotted with saltbush. Very exposed. And for the first time, barbwire fencing was visible on my left. I was resigned to spending another night at an organised Roadside Rest Area, one that was marked on my map and about 30 kays out of Madura. It was nestled hard up to the steep timbered sides of the Bluff. I parked as far as I could to the rear of this area, but by 6:00 PM the main area was overflowing with generator using, kid and dog owner rigs. One couple even had a travelling lead tied to the front and rear of their rig onto nearby trees and a

Kelpie and Blue Cattle Dog informed us of every approaching Roadtrain all bloody night! No wonder dog owners find it hard to travel and find sufficient Caravan Parks to accept their pets!

Day Five

I had a light breakfast and was enjoying my usual flavoursome, discarded skinshed coffee as I pottered about making ready to decamp when 2 middle-aged German couples strolled down the short track to my position. We nodded G'day to each other and then struck up a conversation. Apart from the vast distances which they found astounding, they were amazed at Australians love of dogs. Sensitively put I thought for a nationality not renowned for their tolerance. I half expected to see slaughtered animals and disembowelled bodies, all with little black caps placed on their heads to justify their actions as I left the area!

But no....

They were lovely people and because of their friendliness, I was again the last to leave the now deserted Rest Stop. Maybe it was just as well because the 'crush' had basically 'fenced' me in.....some people seem to think that they are the only ones around!

This day varied little weather-wise than the preceding 3 days.

I guess I shouldn't complain; it was far better to travel in this type of weather than doing the long haul in above 40-degree heat! But the sou-easterly was playing havoc with my fuel consumption.

I was averaging only 2 ½ kilometres per litre!

I cannot remember the bloke who had originally advised me to go around Australia counter-clockwise to ensure that I would always have a tailwind, but if I ever recollect who it was, I'll kill the bastard! From Noosa to Cooktown I had the remnants of cyclones and rain depressions beating onto my windshield; across the Gulf similar winds bucking my passage; from Port Hedland to almost Perth the seasonal sou-westerly blasted my progress; across the Nullarbor and down the west coast of the Eyre Peninsular an unseasonal prolonged, howling sou-easterly made a mockery of my already thirsty truck. I reckon that if I got a tailwind of the same magnitude that I have experienced with the headwinds, my fuel economy rates would soar into the 20's if I had to switch the engine on at all!!!!

I passed Mundrabilla RH without stopping, mainly because they didn't stock LPG and drove onto Eucla RH.

This leg from Madura to Eucla RH's traversing the coastal plain varied little.

The road was flat and straight with an occasional curve to get you excited.

The landscape varied from open flat grasslands of a surprising green tinge with trees dotting the area, or salt or bluebush with stunted trees. While crossing this type of landscape, I spotted in the distance on the flat straight road a large mob of Emus and on another section, Kangaroos. But when I got to the point where each of the mobs crossed, I could not see them. It was as if they had melted into the saltbush landscape. Their colouring and body shapes melded with the variegated shadings and rounded outlines of the stunted saltbush.

It was only when you got down on all fours on the verge of the road and peered at the horizon that

you could quite easily discern the outlines of both mobs of Roos and Emus. I must have looked quite a twit crawling along the verge of the road trying to figure out where these mobs had got to and then spying them, watching them for some time in awe at the camouflaging effect in this open, hostile environment.

Luckily, the traffic was light and my antics were only noticed by a few fellow travellers and the ubiquitous Roadtrain Captain.

I stopped at Eucla RH to fill up with LPG and to ring home. A young bloke came over as I stood at the pump and asked which way I was heading. Decent enough looking bloke, not having the crazed eyes of an axe murderer. He and his girl friend had hitched a lift with a Roadtrain Driver at Kalgoorlie and had basically driven all night to get to this spot. They clambered out of the cabin while the Truckie had re-fuelled half-crazed with fear. The Truckie had begun talking to the chick after the young bloke had fallen asleep about Malak (the NSW Hitchhiker Murderer). She had nudged her boyfriend awake just as the Truckie was offering her some white powder. They fearfully declined anything that he offered them all night and this had been the first opportunity that they could flee the cabin. They did not get any particulars of the truck unfortunately.

I explained the shortcomings of my truck having only one passenger seat and no rear seat, but he was most welcome to join me as long as he accepted stretching out over the toolbox behind the front seats. I also explained my mode of snail-paced progress. If all that was acceptable then they were most welcome to join me. His young girlfriend at that moment walked up to us. A lovely young thing. I said dead-pan that the sleeping arrangements were that he slept in the truck and his young friend could enjoy the comforts of an inner-spring double bed in my van leaving my whereabouts to his imagination.

I fear that their harrowing experience of the night before drove any form of humour from their bodies. They walked away, possibly firmly convinced that all middle-aged solo male travellers were all deviates and axe murderers!

I must admit, in hindsight, my black sense of humour may have been a little insensitive under the circumstance as both seemed very rattled over their all night 'experience'!

As I came back to the truck after paying for the gas re-fill, I noticed them settled by the side of the road waiting expectantly with thumbs out and printed sign clearly displaying their hopeful destination.

I drove the rig away from the bowser positions and parked.

Went into the 'Café/Pub' for a meal and to watch some of the cricket on their satellite dish fed TV.

Asked the pretty young thing who served me, what the condition of the road was like that led to the coast and the Eucla Telegraph Station ruins. Especially after the recent rains. OK, it seemed, so after a Steak Sandwich, a cup of coffee and an eyeful of curves and smiles, I drove the 6-odd kilometres towards the coast to the ruins.

(You have to ask yourself why the serving staff in a lot of these remote Roadhouses not just across the Nullarbor but also in Far NW Queensland and northern WA all seemed to be pretty young things.....or perhaps my sense of 'beauty' has been somewhat compromised by so many solo miles on the road...!!)

There was several rigs and solo cars parked haphazardly in the circular parking area. There was a

group of adults and kids skiing and sledding down the nearby high, steep dunes as I circled around the ruins viewing it with a photographic eye, careful not to allow my footfalls in the sand to encroach into any photo frame that I chose. There was an elderly couple in the process of taking 'shots' of the ruins.....positioning each other on the stone walls, open window or door portals or beside the skeletal remains of two chimneys. I climbed up a nearby sand dune to set up to take some photos.

A bloke walked up behind me and with a twangy, yank voice wondered aloud why people found it necessary to crawl over ruins and take a photo with their spouse so posed as though without this person present in the photo frame no-one would believe that they had been there; a photographic form of a graffiti artist at work!

He was a Negro, bald head covered with a New York Yankee cap, an over-sized US Basketball T-shirt and red satin over-sized shorts. He stood about 7 foot tall! Dark sunglasses and a flashing smile. He held an expensive looking camera and several lens packs over his shoulder. His friend, the woman with him was.....I melted into the sand! She stood almost as tall, her bare, dark legs started at her ear-lobes. I tried very hard to emerge from the pool that I had become, to stretch my 1700mm frame a little higher so that I could get my eye-level surreptitiously above her ear-lobe level! Those pretty young things that I had unashamedly flirted with at various Road Houses suddenly paled into dog status. She had a sturdy camera tripod balanced over one bare shoulder, a massive camera bag slung over the other. Her body, her face, her cleavage.....I desperately struggled to emerge from the puddle, seeing myself ooze to be lost in the grains of sand!

Forever!

We sat there for about ½ hour waiting for the elderly couple to finish their personal photo-shoot. I secretly now wished that they'd take all day! After agreeing with the habit of some to place their presence indelibly on the negatives of remote ruins when a photo capturing the remoteness, the timelessness, the solitude of the creeping sand dunes slowly devouring this building would reflect the essence of the scene more beautifully, I could not very well request this Siren to drape her lithe, leggy figure over a stone wall to appease my lasciviousness!

Could I?....Oh! Where is the photo of the leggy assistant amongst the countless that I took?!

We both circled the ruins several times after the elderly couple eventually left taking shots at various angles, swapping stories of our journeys so far but I don't remember much of their details. She even walked up steep sand dunes carrying all this camera gear with style like a bloody Goddess! She was almost his pack-horse....I would have loved to have seen his home-girl! I got sick and tired of hoisting myself out of the melted pool that I had become and not wanting to give the impression of being just a dirty old man, I fared them well and hit the road again.

I negotiated back up onto the escarpment, through Eucla RH and onto the WA/SA Border Post.

A very impressive outpost!

It was as if even the rain was quarantined at the border post because as soon as you entered SA, within only a couple of kays, the vegetation took on a completely different appearance. The open Mallee woodland degenerated into scattered, stunted trees and salt/bluebush plains. Various tracks and several bitumen off-roads took you to the Bunda Cliff line. A remarkable, continuous 200-kilometre length of 100 metre high cliff-line with not a break for its entire length. The land above it was tabletop level, which accentuated the sheer drop-off of the cliffs. The Southern Ocean pounded angrily at the base line and in most spots where you viewed this phenomenon, the cliff-line was

dangerously undercut.

If any one happened to fall over the edge, their body would never be able to be retrieved.

At one formed viewing area, the parking area was positioned on a serration that jutted out and I walked around the cliff-line so that I could get a shot of my rig and the height of the precipice for perspective purposes. As I set up the tripod, the two large rigs with a dozen kids between them that I had spied at the Eucla Ruins sledding down the sand dunes pulled into the parking area. The rigs disgorged a tribe including several yapping dogs, all to perch themselves on the cliff top edge. From my position I could see that where they stood, the cliff undercut dangerously below them and the edge on which they stood appeared to be only inches thick though in reality, was perhaps several metres thick. I waved my hands and ran towards them to warn them of the danger. They were thankful for my concern and as I wandered back to my tripod and camera, one of the blokes followed me wanting to get a similar photo perspective as I intended.

We turned as we got to my camera and tripod position, both horrified to now see that the remaining adults and kids had joined hands and were now lying down right at the edge at the same location. As though this would save them if that portion of ledge should collapse! The guy beside me near shat himself now that he could see what had previously frightened me.....But then again I had trekked for kilometres so it seemed around the rim of this abyss at every spot (which was quite a few) that I had driven to!

I headed east into the howling sou-easterly, the sky still heavy overcast.

I'd done over 300 kays that day and felt I'd done enough, so I started to look for a track off to the left as to the right was only meagre vegetation. And besides, if I did my normal walk in the bush just on sunset, I didn't want to stumble over a 100-metre cliff!

It was a "Truckies Stop" with a large gravel dump behind it.

These 'Stops' differed from the normal 'Off Road Rest Stops' where trucks were not permitted to stop. This was a large flat area that could accommodate several Roadtrains without any problems, where they could hunker down beside these large gravel mounds. Behind that there was a large gravel pit, which I was tempted to drive down into. Tracks in its base indicated that it had been used previously by other disenchanted former Rest Stop Users!

Perhaps!

There were several dirt tracks that led around past this pit to disappear into the scrub, winding towards large clumps of stunted trees in the distance.

About 2 kays off the road.

Rabbits of a remarkable size bounded away as I crawled along. More than likely Hares (Are there Hares in Australia?.....I don't know!) Two Emus looked at me petulantly before turning to stride almost regally away, holding their heads in an almost aloof manner. I circled one clump of scraggy trees, crawling along a rutted track. I discarded this position as some tribe had left their litter behind. A complete mess in the middle of the bush. Says something about the supposedly famous belief of their utter respect for the land! I eventually hunkered down in the middle of a small grove of stunted but dense trees that protected me from the cold wind and where the road or the searchlights of night-driving Roadtrains could not be discerned. It never occurred to me that if I had a heart attack, a stroke or was bitten by a snake, that I would never be found or at least, not

stumbled upon until the Litter Tribe returned from their Walk-about.

In my usual 'sunset stroll' after tea further along the track, I almost walked into the middle of a mob of Roos lounging in the shade of stunted trees. Their manic speed of escape was incredible. I waited patiently on several occasions in the middle of the track while a number of snakes slithered away. Several lizards peered suspiciously at my form and allowed me to draw surprisingly close to them before they ambled off. The bird life too was abundant and noisy and I was supposedly, on the edge of the Nullarbor Plain!

I was about 60-70 kays west of the geographic western extremity of the Nullarbor!

Day Six

I was down to almost emergency rations with only a few sausages, one egg, long life milk and a few frozen vegetables left before I'll need to dip into them. No bread, Vita-Weet biscuits being the satisfactory substitute. I'd started to feel the effects of sponge downs in lieu of showers and my hair was taking on the appearance of Dreadlocks!

I ambled into Nullarbor RH to fill up with LPG. As had been the case at every Road House where I had re-filled you wander into the shop to pay the bill and as there was no connection between the Office and the Bowser, they ask you how much mate and always took your word on the damage!

About 100 metres west of the Nullarbor RH, I passed the sign proclaiming the western extremity of the Nullarbor Plain and at last travelled through country that my preconceptions had thought were the 'typical' treeless plain.

Flat, treeless, saltbush country, the road straight to the horizon with no deviation!

About 5 kilometres past the RH I turned right onto the formed tarred road that took me to the 'Head of the Bight' in dazzling sunshine, the temperature in the late 30's but the wind still blowing. At the termination of the road there was a relatively new, substantial Toilet Block and Information Board.

I walked the 50-100 metre formed boardwalk to the coast.

To the west, the sheer 100-metre cliff line ran to the horizon.

To the east, the coast dazzled with large unending, high, golden sand dunes. A clean line of demarcation between the two! No graduation! It was as if Mother Nature had got bored with the endless cliff line and petulantly like any female, severed the run like a hot knife through butter, forming a distinctly different coastal pattern to re-ignite interest.

The variation was incredible!

Back onto the 'main drag' it's not long before the sign that designated the eastern extremity of the Nullarbor Plain is passed.

As I mentioned before, it is only 18 kays across!!

Almost immediately, the vegetation changes to open Mallee scrub then gradually into heavily timbered Mallee Bush. The road begins to undulate gently into hilly country. By Nundroo RH, the surrounding countryside has cleared into vast open wheat stubble paddocks blotched with grazing sheep. But it is obvious that the area is marginal, dry farming land.

It was mid-afternoon as I filled up at Nundroo and knew that I would not make Ceduna that day.

It was still 150 kays away.

The bloke at the RH had been the Head Chef at the Regent Hotel in Sydney but preferred the isolated life-style that Nundroo offered, cooking for the Shearers as they came through....you can't beat some people!

I decided to take the T/O to Fowlers Bay along a 31 kilometre dirt road to the coast.

Through dry open stubble paddocks littered liberally with limestone stones and rocks, vast salt pans that the track bisected and past substantial ruins of the original Homestead run of this area.

Fowlers Bay was a remote, sleepy little hollow, nestled hard up against the eastern extremity of a vast sand dune chain system.

Extremely dry country.

One street, about 5 buildings, a Caravan Park of sorts, a jetty and 1 metre high fringe of seaweed that covered the beach-front, blown and deposited there by the still howling sou-easterly wind. The woman who was the Manageress of the Van Park also operated the 'General Store' (read minimally stocked Kiosk) and was more interested in wanting to know where I intended to camp at Ceduna, recommending one particular Van Park which incidentally, she and her husband also managed!

The general gist of the conversation made me wonder on the degree of scenic wonders that may exist in this 'Burg'!

On my habitual reconnoitre later I was to discover not surprisingly, that there were none!

Two blokes who were re-fuelling a trawler moored at the end of the jetty by hand pumping diesel from a 44-gallon drum perched on the back of a Ute parked at the beginning of the jetty into another drum supported on a tracked drey that they then pushed along the length of the jetty on light rail tracks, had more fingers and toes between them than their combined IQ.

Their manner, actions and speech pattern made Taswegians look like Einstein progenies!

There were two large rigs parked on the edge of town almost on the flanks of a large salt-pan. Apparently they had been there for several days concerned to the point of inactivity in negotiating the 30-odd kilometre rough dirt track back to the black top. Hoping obviously that the local Council would tar the track to enable them to re-join the main drag in comfort! They were the butt of generous snide remarks by the couple who ran the Caravan Park possibly upset too by the fact that they were unpaid guests of the hamlet.

I think there was more to the situation than they were ready to explain to me!

The only other camper in the Park except for me was a bloke who had a Pantech 5-ton truck that was parked hard up to a canvas lean-to tent. A camp stretcher, several stacked timber fruit-boxes in which neatly stacked canned provisions were arranged, an electric kettle and the largest Hi-fi system outside of a Norman Ross store taking pride of place on top of the boxes, took up the available space in the tent. If the bloke turned the Hi-fi on to half volume I felt that they would hear it in Ceduna about 200 kilometres away! The sides of the Pantech were lifted up to display an

assortment of construction tools and ladders crammed into the interior.

I noticed all this as I played out my electric lead to connect up for power at the only power pole in the Park.

That was how I started a conversation with this bloke.

Mid to late 30's, clean shaven, relatively clean, honest looking bloke. We ended up chatting for several hours.....how do I get myself into these situations? We spoke about the construction industry, what was around here in terms of building work (very little!), the secrets of life, of marriage, (he has two failed ones), divorce, children of broken marriages, maintenance, religion, the power of the mind, the medical wonders of weed and other worldly matters, his time in a Psychiatric Hospital to which he had been admitted on three separate occasions and the therapeutic values of the Bible! But a nice enough bloke, seemingly harmless, if a little shell-shocked and cynical.....how the hell do I manage it!

Perhaps it takes one to know one!

Even the Manager who waylaid me after I had torn myself away from this bloke and had some tea, cleaned up and was heading for and looking forward to my first hot shower in over a week, informed me of this bloke's three 'admissions' but confided that he was harmless. Unfortunately this bloke too, liked a friendly chat so it was some time before I entered the shower recess.....to find out alarmingly that they had run out of gas to provide hot water.....at 9 o'clock on a chilly night a cold shower was not bliss!

My sole camping companion of the bent religious fervour indicated that they had been out of gas to provide the warm showers for over a week. Paying a nightly tariff of \$12 without enjoying the luxury of a warm/hot shower I thought was a bit rich and I wondered if that was the real reason why there was a 'choke' of 2 tandem axle Caravans on the outskirts of town.

I was too buggered by this time to argue about the issue and fell into bed trying to get warm after the late night cold shower!

Day Seven

I awoke before sun-up, making ready to go and planning to wander over the substantial homestead ruins about 19 kilometres out of town.

I had a light breakfast of my last remaining egg and Vita-Weet biscuits and a punnet of Tropical Fruit pieces and had wandered over to the power pole to disconnect my lead.

It was only just light but this bloke was up and raring to talk!

He also suffered from ADD Syndrome and only required about 3 hours sleep a night....similar to my mate Phil who I now suspected may suffer from a similar blight.....I managed to tear myself away after about 2 ½ hours!

After discussing the possible adverse effects of mixing anti-depressant drugs, sleeping tablets and the weed on the psyche and the well-being of a person, the positive wonders of life and living which I endeavoured to engender to again revolve back to his beloved interpretation of the Bible. His somewhat stilted understanding of conjugal rights, the rights of a husband to enforce his will upon the spouse was reinforced in his mind by the constant thumbing through his dog-eared Bible to

espouse various texts that he felt expressed these bent thoughts!

When-ever the Bible was thrust in my direction with particular verses underlined to support his weirder and wilder hypotheses I would reject his interpretations saying to him blandly that that is not what those particular words stated which unfortunately caused him to become more and more agitated!

It was time for me to leave!

His parting shot said in a friendly and comical manner was that The Bible was all in an individual's interpretation.

I almost stopped and returned to his camp. Instead, I just replied that no-where in the bible did it condone rape!

Then I got out of there as fast as I could!

I turned off the main dirt road onto several farm tracks crawling over a number of rock strewn ridges of dry stubble, through several gates that I left as I found them to approach the ruins of this large Homestead and associated out-buildings. On the highest ridge there were a number of lonely gravestones of the original Homesteaders. The most recent was of an obviously respected Elder of the local Aboriginal tribe and I was most taken with the bright brass etched epitaph.

The Ruins were of the Yalata Run that originally stretched from Ceduna which is 200 kilometres to the east to around 200 kilometres to the west which is about at the 'Head of the Bight' all of which is marginal farming land. But the hardships of isolation, heat and uncompromising weather in starting up and continuing with this 'spread' would have been extreme. The sheer hard work in turning the Mallee scrub and rocky, broken ground into wheat and pasture paddocks would have been unbelievable.

The house 'runs' were all surrounded by extensive rock and stone fences.....and still the paddocks were rock strewn!

It took me some time to find a dirt track that appeared to head in the right direction towards the highway that was some 30-40 kilometres north. The country-side I passed through was typical of what I have previously described. The temperature was in the low 40's. Flocks of Galahs, Crows and Magpies escorted me and sheep gazed at my passing and the dust comb bloomed out behind me.

There were a large number of original stone farm houses lying in ruins and a lot of stone cairns that denoted a former School House or even hamlets that no longer existed.

I arrived in Ceduna and was hunkered down at the Foreshores Caravan Park by mid-afternoon with the temperature at 43°C. (It reached 46°C the following day and at 10:00 PM on that night was still 40°C!).

I had taken 7 days to do the 1181 kilometres (if you travelled on the blacktop) from Norseman to Ceduna, travelling a total of 1342 kilometres for 'The Crossing', travelled 5 of those 7 days in overcast, grey skies through drizzle and rain squalls always heading into a fierce headwind that murdered my economy rate to 2.75 kilometres to the litre for the entire crossing!

But I had conquered 'The Crossing'.

I will not be like two rigs that I saw with signs written on them proudly boasting for all to see, I conquered the Nullarbor Plain. I doubt that they got into as much trouble as I did, but then again, I doubt that they got off the blacktop or stopped to help some-one in need or got into the conversations that I did!

My paranoia has abated.....perhaps to resurface when I tackle the Gunbarrel or Cameron Corner tracks!!!!

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4/3/01

I DIDN'T CATCH YOUR NAME

After taking too many days to cross the Nullarbor in most peoples' eyes and luckily in mostly overcast skies, the last leg from Fowlers Bay to Ceduna was in above 40-degree heat. Stopping at the Quarantine Gate outside Ceduna, I fell into a conversation with the Quarantine Officer as he inspected the inside of my frig.

‘Yes, it was a bit hot, but regardless of the temperature here in Ceduna, it would be between 5 to 10 degrees hotter than that at Yalata and the Nullarbor Roadhouse’.

Thankfully I'd passed through there on the previous day. SA and Adelaide were experiencing the hottest summer on record and if the next two days were above 40 degrees, then the record for consecutive days of above 40-degree heat would also be broken.

The 3rd day that I was camped at Ceduna, it reached 46 degrees at 3:30PM and was still 40 degrees at 7:00PM; 36 at 10:00PM. That was according to the thermometer that I had in the van.....

Even the Aborigines who lounged in the ‘strip’ park between the Caravan Park and the Sea-wall lay around like stunned Mullets.....and it wasn't because of their alcoholic intake!

The following day to escape the predicted continuation of the heat I hit the road in the truck with the a/c blasting.

Through Denial Bay via dirt roads through marginal wheat country to the coast west of this area, then via a circuitous route inland skirting east around Ceduna to Smoky Bay on the coast south of Ceduna. Then via the coast road through several Conservation Parks back to Ceduna. It was still hot! The thing that you noticed, apart from the dry marginal farming land, vast paddocks of grain

stubble and the general appearance of the countryside cowering under the scorching heat, was the number of ruins of original stone homesteads, and cairns that marked former hamlets, schools and churches that no longer existed.

A howling sou-easterly came in that night bringing relief in one respect and causing problems in another.

The Greys' who had encapsulated themselves inside their air-conditioned, gleaming clean vans for the last 3 or 4 days ventured out to re-tie down flapping annex canvas and to envelop their shiny 'chargers' in car-tarps.

Can't get the 'rig' dirty you know!

The majority of these people snubbed their noses at the appearance of my mud encrusted, dirt streaked rig (and more than likely my unshaven, longhaired persona!).

Due to the heat and water restrictions, I could not allay their disgust!

Not that I really wanted to....!

But at 3:00 AM when the gale struck, my offered help was not ignored. After that, they seemed to slide back into reticence at my friendliness and chatty overtures. What the heck.....and I didn't look all that black!

The next morning just after sun-up, I wrestled with the lock on the exit gate out of the Caravan Park and wandered over to the 'Town Jetty'. I had to skirt around several groups of alcohol sodden Aborigines asleep in the 'strip' park who were surrounded by a sea of empty beer cans and cartons.

This town sure is progressive.....they will refuse to sell bottles to the local Abs but 'slabs' of cans.....I stepped over three 'comatosed' Abs about halfway along the jetty. Two old blokes and a spindly old woman slept in a circle, their heads resting on the next person's bent knee. Both the blokes' pants were wet stained around the crutch. I couldn't tell about the woman, but the urine smell must have been pungent...not that they seemed to mind.

I couldn't understand how more Abs in their drunken stupors didn't take a right hand lurch and end up drowning in the water about 6 metres below the level of the jetty.....maybe it was just never reported in the local 'press'!...

Just a common occurrence..... you know!

I wandered out to the tip of the jetty where a lone figure was fishing, his legs apart, braced against the gale.

Seemed like a waste of time to me.

I sauntered up to him.

"G'day. How's it going?" He looked at me. A shrug of the shoulders. A big man. He stood over 6'0" tall, barrel-chested that expanded into a stomach that surged over his pants. Huge upper arms, short blunt fingers. He gave a sudden yank on the rod.

"Gettin' plenty a bites but not hookin' a bloody thing....I'm just feedin' 'em! This wind's not doin'

much for the fishin'....but I was told that you don't catch much offa here in any case....but I had some time ta kill so I thought I'd give it a go."

He gave another huge yank on the rod then retrieved to re-bait, throwing out with the gale force wind for another go.

We started to talk.

He was a Pastor with the Pentecostal (?) Church at Innamincka (?). He was over here for a joint-religion conference. A former Alcoholic and Drug Addict who confessed with great sincerity that if he hadn't found the 'Word of God' would be dead by now. We talked about Creationism, the Evolution of the Species, the plight of the Aborigines, the Ten Commandments, Reconciliation, Land Rights, his congregation, mostly local Abs.....Oh! We covered the lot! Every so often he would give a huge yank of the rod, retrieve, re-bait and throw out. He had a huge respect for the Aborigine and their customs, religion and their custodianship of the land. I flippantly mentioned the refuse around the slumbering forms in the nearby park, the alcoholism, the practice of former fervent religious orders forcing whole tribes into Missions to erase their culture, their religions, their beliefs, their language; white man's genocide of whole tribes, and in the case of Tasmania, a whole race! He continued to yank alarmingly on the rod whenever he felt a small bite being transferred down the line.

I wondered aloud whether the 'Word of the Lord' was what the Abs required....whether it would be their salvation.

He fervently believed that it would be so.

You couldn't fault him on his enthusiasm.

Another yank of the rod.

He disbelieved in 'Reconciliation and Land Rights' citing the fact that in the case of Land Rights, the original Mabo Decision was for an 'Island Tribe' whose customs and way of survival differed considerably to the mainland nomadic rituals. The 'Islanders' food gathering practices were more akin to Polynesian life-styles. The tribal Aborigines of the mainland had no thought for land ownership and only wished for 'access across former walk-about' tracks and to-day, with the more rooted life-style of tribes or families, only wanted that access for ceremonial and reminiscent purposes.

I had a vision of wheat paddocks littered with beer cartons and cans!

Cynical me!

He gave a yank on the line.

He solemnly stated that those Abs who he had bought the 'Word of God' to were not interested in Land Rights, Reconciliation or 'Saying Sorry'. It was only those educated, city raised, half-castes who had forsaken God as their Saviour and were not rooted in the Aborigines' ancient legends or beliefs and also greedy white 'law people' who propelled the continuation of these Court Cases. As far as 'Saying Sorry', there had been wrongs and sins committed on both sides, actions taken at the time by sincere people who, in those times and beliefs, believed that they were doing the 'right thing'.

He yanked on the line, retrieved, re-baited and threw out again.

Much the same as the Germans and Japanese during the War....why should they say sorry and pay compensation for the acts that they believed were the right thing to do at the time.

Said sarcastically I thought on my part!

To allay any misconceptions that I may have given him as to the level of cynicism or argumentativeness on my part, I suggested that perhaps he could be a bit more patient in his angling practises. You know....a bit more subtle! Like....he would have no converts in his line of business if he had no patience....he had to wait until his brethren had read the 'Word of the Lord' and believed in it before he could take the next step and baptise them in the name of his "God". He looked at me quizzically as he gave another yank on the rod, unsure on whether I was talking sarcastically or not! I re-iterated in simpler or not as obtuse terms. 'The fish will take a small taste before they realise that what was being offered was good for them before they would take that large bite...that final step!'

'Subtle....'

He nodded his comprehension just as he braced himself to give another yank. Instead he relaxed his stance, looked at me and with a smile on his face said, "Subtle!" He whooped with joy as he realised that at long last he had hooked a fish. He reeled it in. A sorry excuse for a Whiting that was smaller than the Pilchers that he had been cutting up for bait! But he plopped it into his bucket stating that the smallest was the sweetest and that he did not practice miracles as his Lord in loaves and fishes! All the same I was disgusted and on the verge of remonstrating him on the keeping of undersized fish regardless of what his 'God' taught when his family joined us. His wife was a tiny slip of a thing who stood no more than 5'0" tall and was having trouble bracing herself against the still howling wind. He had told me previously that she too was also a former drug addict who had found the 'Word of God'. Two young kids held the hands of a roly-poly Aboriginal girl. Blue-black shiny skin, a prominent brow and cheeks that appeared to swallow her eyes. I was introduced to Mary (what else would she be known as!)...the 'Nanny' obviously I thought cynically.....again!

He bought in two more small Silver Whiting as we stood there, his kids jumping around with excitement. 'A couple more Dad and we can have them for tea to-night!' they shrieked.

'Yes, a couple more and we might...but they're pretty small and as long as I'm subtle....'

They wandered off down the jetty and we continued our discussion on the plight of the Australian Aboriginal, his life, his family, his congregation, his personal disbelief of the "Sorry Debate". I proffered that to say 'sorry' would or could be misconstrued by those looking and waiting for any sign of weakness on the part of their adversary, as an admission of wrongdoing and thus would seek monetary compensation from the Commonwealth Government....just to keep the conversation bubbling. He embraced this reflection on my part as a good reason for us not to go down this road.....but again it would be only those Abs who had not found The Lord who would be interested in lining their pockets.....whatever! He caught a couple more undersized Whiting, smiling to himself as he unhooked the fish to plop them into his bucket, muttering 'Subtle' as he did so.

We'd been talking for about 2 hours.

The wind still howled, the drunken prone figures at the end of the jetty still hadn't moved.

He asked me if I'd ever thought about teaching less fortunate people about the 'Word of the Lord', as I would make an excellent Pastor.

It was time for me to go.

I thanked him for his time, his opinions and wished him all the best for a successful and tasteful tea that night and turned to walk the length of the jetty.

He called after me,

"By the way....I didn't catch your name."

I turned.

"Peter.....Peter 'The Fisherman'".

I turned and began to walk away.

I could hear the laughter erupt from his huge frame, to be grabbed and flung away on the wind.

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11/03/01

THE DANCERS OF THE PLAINS

You've all seen the TV features and some of you would have seen the Movie 'Twister' where those modern day 'Knights on Chargers' pinpointed and chased those wonders of Nature and Destruction in "Tornado Alley" in central and southern US States. Unafraid and driving trucks crammed with scientific and 'picture making' equipment, these typical American dull witted cretins chased those funnels of destruction for a chance of 15 seconds of fame.

I have joined the 'Brotherhood'!

I was at Port Augusta at the apex of Spencers Gulf in SA, and was again immobilised by another mechanical failure in the ongoing saga of "The Age of Discontent" authored by a tired 10-year old Nissan Patrol that always seems to cost me over \$1000 a time to rectify.

I'd been tossing up whether I should head south down the Yorke Peninsular or alternatively, head north through the Flinders Ranges, Leigh Creek, Oodnadatta and up to Alice Springs and Darwin. You see, Lake Eyre was flooded.

A sight to behold and a once in a life-time experience!

Or so I was told.

But the temperature at that time at Port Augusta was in the high 30s-early 40's and all those places north were at least 5-10 degrees hotter.... so I was told. Something that the truck dislikes intensely which I've mentioned before ! To be stranded on the Oodnadatta Track or bogged for weeks on the shores of a flooded Lake Eyre did not to me seem like a viable or preferred option....but the truck had served me well over the Nullarbor without missing a beat....and gee....you gotta think positive about these things....like a woman, pander to its subliminal vanities!

So I decided to do an exploratory thrust (see....treat it like a woman) whilst I whispered positives on its many strengths.....bloody hell!....I need to get back to Perth!

I left early on the Friday morning heading up the tar towards the Flinders. The escarpment of the southern Flinders Ranges was not that far north of Port Augusta and displayed a brilliant range of colours that contrasted sharply with the ubiquitous wheat stubble paddocks that spread out as a flat landscape at its feet as the sun set or rose. You negotiated over this southern rim into an almost 'bowl-like' interior of gently rolling or flat landscape of more wheat stubble paddocks completely surrounded by this jagged blue line of 'mountains'.

Truly beautiful country.

My progress tended to be slow, as I stopped at various stone Homestead ruins, stone cairns that depicted once bustling Hamlets, Wagon-stops, Schools or just to look at and walk down dry, crooked creek beds lined with ancient gnarled and twisted River Gums.....I now know why I travel alone.....if any-one else had been with me they'd have been reduced to a gibberish blob of meat in the passenger's seat at my constant and frequent 'stoppings'! I'd often turn around to retrace my passage so that I could spy the vista that was spread out before me from a different perspective.....you see I knew that I would not return by this route down the bitumen to Port Augusta but would return via various back-roads and farm tracks.....I hate back-tracking.....if you can get the gist of my mentally!

I'd left Port Augusta around 7:30 AM that morning and arrived in Hawker around 1:00 PM. A distance of about 110 kilometres!

Hawker is touted by the local Tourist Board as the 'Hub of the Flinders'.

A sleepy little hamlet that cowered under the hot sun.

It was about 44°C!

There wasn't a person in sight; no cars parked at kerb lines; all were battened down under carports or in garages. If you fired a gun down the main street about the only thing that you would hit would be, maybe, the bayonet of the ubiquitous 'War Memorial' Statue!....the only silly bugger out in the middle of the day except me....at least he had a hat on! I shouted myself lunch at the renovated former Railway Station, cleverly and originally renamed the 'Station Cafe' and re-stocked up on cold drinks for my return trip to Port Augusta via those dusty back roads. I didn't want to go any further north into the Flinders, to Wilpena Pound or other beauty spots of the Flinders as I knew I'd be this way again.

It truly is beautiful country.

On my crawl north up the blacktop through mile upon mile of wheat stubble paddocks, I'd seen numerous Willy-willies scamper, skip and pirouette across the dusty paddocks. Some small; some large. Mostly they were lonely columns of dust bending and curling into the vivid blue sky. Like prima donnas they touched lightly down on the flat dusty plain, to weave a silent dance. A delicate spectral that suddenly appeared and then just as mysteriously disappear as they approached the scree of the jagged escarpment. At deep, dry creek beds they would often disintegrate to re-appear as they lightly touched down on the far bank. I watched enthralled at the crest of a hill as two small Willy-Willies seemed to dance in concert, bending, curling and pirouetting in unison. Skipping or disappearing as they pranced over a creek bed to land like Ballet Dancers in step to continue their duet over the stage of the dry plain.

I didn't think that I would be able to photograph them or do their beauty, their fragility justice in a snapshot so I didn't even try. But thinking about it as I had lunch at the Station Café, I thought that I should at least try on my return leg if I was given the chance.

I headed for the 'back-blocks' roads never sure in which direction these back-roads would take me. But I picked out a prominent jagged peak to the south and endeavoured to always head for it. These backtracks tended to be straight and were laid out in rectangular patterns, skirting the perimeters of farm holdings as a rule, only wavering at creek beds and/or crossings...

Or so I believed.

Except for the creek crossings which were surprisingly deeply cut into the ground, the paddocks appeared to be on a more level plain with only slight undulations. I spotted numerous dusty funnels scampering across the landscape but they were too far away and the patterned limitations of the roads and the speed that these funnels skipped across the paddocks limited my chances of a decent 'shot'.

I was stopped in the middle of a dry creek bed crossing looking at the large Gums perched on undercut banks that exposed twisting root systems when with a roar, flying dust, leaves and flying debris a Willy-Willy past not 20 metres from me. I raced back to the truck to retrieve my camera and tripod and clambered up the bank to try for a shot. The funnel was scampering away from me like an errant child and then just disappeared! I swore to myself and picked up tripod and camera and turned around to retrace my steps back to the truck....to almost be bowled over by a slender curving dusty funnel. There didn't appear to be much noise, just a confusion of wind direction, a showering of dust, dirt and minuscule debris that was being lifted by the force of the wind. Just as suddenly it seemed to disappear, a slight slender curving, a hook of dust hanging some 30 metres in the air marking the apex of the funnel before it too seemed to suddenly dissipate.

Truly remarkable! Beautiful! Mysterious! Spectral!

God.....I could write a poem on them....(I can hear the groans from here!)

I saw several others scamper across the paddocks to dash themselves onto the sides of the escarpment as I continued. It must be the ambient temperature, the wind direction and the 'bowl-shape' of the topography that encouraged the number that I saw.

They all had a life of their own, an identity.

Some pirouetted proudly, erect, youthful, and slender in their enthusiasm to dance to Mother Nature's tune. Some curved, bent and bowed in their progress as if dragging a weight tethered to

their shoe. Others hooked, stooped, and appeared gnarled and bulbous like a hideous old crone moving lethargically, tortuously across the paddocks.

I felt that I needed a 'backdrop', a point of perspective to gauge the size of these Willy-willies. I saw a line of dead gums in the distance, skeletal, their stark limbs standing vivid against the blue sky and the dry colour of the stubble paddocks. I drove towards them going through an open gate and over a cattle grid noticing as I approached a large Willy-willy coming towards me across the distant paddocks. It was one of those bulbous, crooked, disjointed funnels that seemed to lumber across the sere paddocks picking up clouds of dust and dirt as it advanced. I raced along the farm track, bouncing into and over drainage ditches and small levee banks hoping to gain a position where I could capture its dance against the backdrop of that line of dead trees. I braked to a halt in a cloud of dust close to my intended position, the funnel seeming to dawdle as though knowing and appreciating my endeavours. I swung out of the truck grabbing my tripod and camera and lens bag with spare film rolls and began running towards the dead trees. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed a lone headstone standing in a section of bare ground. I veered towards it. In my mind's eye if I could incorporate this headstone with the line of dead trees and the twisting funnel of dust rising into the air, the 'shot' would be dripping with symbolism and mysticism.....or so I thought.....that one 'shot' that this time, I would be satisfied with!

I frantically set up, focused in, adjusted F-stop and aperture, rotated the polarising filter and set the zoom to suit. The crooked, bent, bulbous funnel lumbered on a course that would give me the perspective that would include the three subjects in a truly symbolic 'shot'!

Oh! joy oh joy!

Then I realised that my feet were crying in pain from my haste across the sharp stubble ground and worse than that, my legs were being attacked by hundreds of Bull Ants!

Bloody Hell they can bite!

But I managed to get off two shots between yelps of pain and jumping and leaping about!

(Symbolically my attempt at some form of 'dancing on the plains!')

But I knew that they wouldn't be half as good as what I had envisaged in my mind's eye. I raced back to the truck to get my 'hiking sandals' and Bushmen's Insect cream, lathering it hastily over my feet to combat future Bull Ant attacks and wandered back to my camera in time to see 'The Old Man' Willy-willy dash itself against the escarpment in the distance.

It never failed to amaze me the number of remote, lonely gravesites that I have come across in silent, distant, desolate areas.

The other thing that truly amazed me was the number of graves of small infants, children and young adults who died in these remote areas.

Dying at such a young age!

I had a vision of a woman cut down in her prime, who, as a young girl on a stage, dressed in Ballerina costume, had pranced awkwardly; just as my daughter had done on numerous occasions. A look of intense concentration on her face totally rapt, engrossed as she pictured herself as a leading Ballerina as she performed; completely ignorant of the audience. I, seated proudly in that audience seeing only her performance amidst a stage full of little girls. All I could see was her

dream....she was....she is a Dame Margot.....

Maybe because of that sudden vision, I decided to wait awhile hoping to capture a youthful, exuberant, erect, poised Willy-willy as it pranced, pirouetted and leapt across the stage of those wheat stubble paddocks. But it was not meant to be. It was as if the curtain had come down on their performance and they had moved to farther stages somewhere in the distance; leaving me expectantly waiting for an encore.

That precious shot oozing with symbolism and mysticism was not going to be taken on that day and so after some time I packed up, returned to the truck and headed on my way.

To leave that lonely grave waiting in eternity for a repeat performance from the Dancers of the Plains.

pcb©

24/03/01

WHAT DO THEY DO WITH IT ALL?

I guess like every one, I've always had an appreciation of how BIG Australia really is.

But until you actually drive the miles, you can never KNOW how vast this Continent really is. Or truly appreciate the devils of distance, the isolation, the dryness, the sheer volume of floods, the heat, and the magnificence of, the sheer vagaries that Mother Nature has evolved in this wonderful continent.

And the countless unexpected surprises that you experience when you come across a scene at total variance to the surrounding topography.....or your preconceived imaginings of what it should be like. The vast majority of those of us reared in the somewhat 'cotton-wool' atmosphere of 'The Big Smoke' may shake our heads in momentary compassion as we hear the 15-second News Story on the "Plights of the Bush People" not comprehending or appreciating the daily struggle that these people endure with stoicism, tenacity and sheer bloody-mindedness.

Sure, I ran across some farm holdings that displayed a wealth, a richness, and an air of the

‘fortunate’ life. But the greater majority of ‘Holdings’ reflected an air of ‘depression’; ‘unkeptness’; ‘of a hard life’; of a constant battle against the weather, distance, isolation, loneliness; of life itself. And yet you get the impression that they’d nought think of ‘giving up’; or of always thinking of ‘wanting to give up’ but they never would!

The vast majority of these people lived in houses, in conditions that we, as city people, would thumb our noses at! And still they could share a laugh, a beer and look forward with hope for a brighter future.

I guess this new-found wave of compassion and respect for the ‘Farming Life’ has been born amidst my discoveries of a myriad silent, isolated grave-sites where the weathered headstones proclaim the passing of people not yet in their prime; of new-borne infants; of children; of isolated, forlorn derelict stone ruins of two and three roomed homesteads that had been built in the late 1800’s, early 1900’s and with the ‘builders’ dreams’ been abandoned to the curse of Nature, to the curse of distance. This has never been more evident than in the marginal farming areas east of the Nullarbor, the Eyre and Yorke Peninsulas and the Flinders Ranges in South Australia. On the By-roads and the back roads of these areas, the wheat stubble paddocks are liberally littered with these grave-sites and former dwellings.

With my wanderings, I have found a new-borne wonderment, respect and a sense of awe for four groups of people.

The Australian Aborigine

While my ‘Eastern State Liberalism’ on the plight of the modern day Aborigine has taken somewhat of a battering and my view of the solutions to their plight are now prefixed with the “303 Rule” and genocide leanings, I can’t help but be filled with admiration and respect for the Aborigine prior to the scourge of ‘White Man’s’ ideology.

To think that these peoples roamed the vastness of this dry and inhospitable continent and eked out an existence rich in language, religion, myth and legend, family bonds and values and kinship whilst being noble guardians for 40-60 centuries, is almost beyond comprehension. To be able to read the land, the weather, the fauna and flora, to just exist for such a time without upsetting the balance of nature in this unforgiving land approaches a wisdom that white man may never master.....or if he does, it be too late for him to right in his voracious march to oblivion.

- The Early Explorers

These early ‘Adventurers’ (often ill prepared and ill timed), set off into the vast unknown usually oblivious to the pitfalls, the vagaries, the dangers and the sheer distance that awaited them. For them there was no ‘air-conditioned steed’, no bituminous roads, no regular ‘pit stops’ in the form of Roadhouses spaced every 100-200 kays apart, no invisible link to the outside populace, no fall-back if something went wrong.....just a cruel and ugly death. To venture across vast waterless, tree-less, scorching deserts, to fight through vast tracts of dense Mallee and Mulga scrub, to battle through impenetrable tropical forest, to be stuck for months while the usual dry land is swamped, inundated to the horizon or sered to dust by a decade long drought seems to this modern day wanderer, to be insurmountable odds. For their stubborn endeavours, they conquered.

- The ‘Diggers’ and early Fossickers.

Those desperate men who sought their fortune usually in the lure of that yellow metal. The vast majority seeing little of it but eking out an existence that was almost indescribably harsh and hostile.

Parting with their pitiful earnings for a gallon of tepid water which was more expensive, more highly valued than any other commodity.

Even the gold itself!

- The Early Pastoralists.

They were lured by reports of unlimited and rich grazing lands (often viewed in those rare times of good rainfall). They may have ventured into these unknown tracts of land before the 'Diggers', but they too would have experienced the blight of distance, the harshness of the weather and environment and the isolation. We may question rightly so, their exuberance in clearing the tired land around them, their choice and practice of farming methods and product and their over-grazing zeal for which we are now only attending to. You cannot but be respectful though, of their industry. The fact that they battled with nought but sweat, blood, tears and human muscle to provide a semblance of a producing property in such alien and unrewarding circumstance I personally hold in extreme awe.

But I completely digress from the original intent of this tale.....as per usual!

At some stage during my working career and with my wanderings later, I have covered the vast proportion of farming land in NSW. These later meanderings have taken me through the central, western and sou'western wheat belts of Queensland that compete for size with those huge grain belt paddocks of NSW. I have skirted the nor'west and the sou'east tips of the vast grain belt crescent of Western Australia. I have traversed the marginal stubble paddocks east of the Nullarbor, the richer plains of the Eyre Peninsular with its open grain paddocks, which is almost the size of the state of Victoria, crawled down the Yorke Peninsular with its smaller, more defined grain paddocks perimetered by lines of trees. I am told that the 'dry land' country of northwest Victoria and central north Victoria are a huge patchwork quilt of grain paddocks.

I have stood awe-struck at 'whistle-stop' hamlets in WA and SA that are nothing but huge towering grain silos and/or horizontal 'bins' heaped with grain that are covered by massive blue tarps. At every little coastal port or large town where deepwater anchorage and grain handling facilities are provided, a massive number of erect concrete silos or their modern day horizontal 'bin' equivalent overshadow the surrounding townscape.

When looking at dry stubble paddocks or green tipped vistas of newly planted spring, summer or winter grain crops, I cannot discern the difference between wheat, barley, rye, millet, sorghum or other grain crops.....but what the heck, the sheer area of land under 'seed' is incomprehensible and the volume of crop gained almost immeasurable to my untrained eyes.

You can't tell me Italians eat that much spaghetti and pasta!!!!

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26/03/01

MORNING EXERCISE

I will warn you now....this little tale will meander, weaving in and out of the original theme that I had envisioned.....my mind is in a less coherent train of thought at this moment than my normal jumble.....

Port Pirie nestles on the western side of the Yorke Peninsular while Whyalla just slightly north of opposite nestles on the eastern side of the Eyre Peninsular. The port cities are separated by the upper reaches of the Spencer Gulf.

It is purported that Whyalla is the largest city outside Adelaide in SA, but the general feel and sprawl of Port Pirie would suggest otherwise. Both cities owe their current status and employment to a large investment by BHP. In the case of Whyalla, the steelworks and now defunct ship-building industry and for Port Pirie, the lead, copper, zinc smelter serviced by ore railed from Broken Hill. It was proudly relayed to me that the smelter was the largest in the world. Something that I dare not dispute! The heavy lead content of the air not seeming to have slowed the 'Boaster's' faculties...as yet!

Port Pirie also has a large deep-water grain loading facility and the 48 tubular concrete grain silos compete with the 403 metre high 'smelter' stack for iconic status over the town.

Port Pirie had not always been a 'Company' town and at one time supported a large fishing boat fleet that netted the rich fishing grounds of the upper Spencer Gulf. It was also an export point for the 'Copper Triangle' of the Yorke Peninsular and the entire peninsular has a proud and long affinity with the original Welsh Miner immigrants who came to mine the copper ore. Along with this export activity and at the same time as the extension of the port and erection of the smelter and the grain export, there was a sizeable furniture manufacturing industry. As the copper mining lured the Welsh, so too were the Italians lured by the fishing. I suspect that the shape of the Yorke Peninsular may have had more to do with it....a more esoteric reason!

For if you look at the shape of the Yorke Peninsular, there is an uncanny resemblance to the high boot of the Italian Peninsular, even with an island (that of Kangaroo Island) near its sole. Oh! Mama Mia!

The fusion of the two races would, you think, make for fine singing voices!

Various activities around our nation were activated by the 2000-2001 celebrations and 'Centenary of Federation' birthday. At the point where Port Pirie was originally named a settlement, (which is now a vast bitumen car/boat trailer parking area and recreational boat ramp, surrounded by mangroves); the proud Italian community have erected an avant-guard three tiered obelisk to their founding fathers. The names proudly etched in gold leaf on one 'tower' for those that came in the 1800's, another for those that settled in the 1900's and the 3rd for those presumably that have settled here in the past few months of the 2000's.

And there appeared not to be a 'Don' amongst them!

Now I don't consider myself to be racist.....but there were quiet rumblings on the street from the Welsh descendants of a perceived slight. The Irish too joined in concert with those few Scots (and English!), and the lone Vietnamese and German family and the single Chinese family (Cantonese actually) who operated the only, but popular Chinese restaurant in town and had done so for three generations (!) also wrote to the local newspaper. I have this vision of passing through Port Pirie in

ten years hence to find the vast parking area and boat ramp inaccessible, cordoned off and looking like some field strewn with haphazard tank trap-like edifices.....I would be terribly disappointed if there was not one such edifice purely for middle-aged caravanners doing “The Big One” who have enjoyed the old-fashion hospitality of the port Pirie residents!

Surely by then they would also have one for Australians.....and God Forbid.....one for Jacky Jacky and Lionel!

Some years back they discovered large Magnesium deposits up near Leigh Creek, not far from the vast open-cut coal deposits. Investigations and economic rationalisation reports and Environmental Studies proceeded at a snail’s pace on the future mining of the ore and the proposed siting of the refinery. It came to pass that Port Pirie with its already rail link network to Leigh Creek, its inherent infrastructure and deep port and wharfing facilities was the way to go. So it is intended to commence construction on this plant just north of the town before this year’s end.

But the greatest stumbling block to this progress has come from the local Indigenous people.....surprise; surprise!

Now while my sympathies still have a tenuous hold to my former ‘Eastern State Liberalism theories’, I thought that the traditional Aboriginal peoples had no thought of ownership over their lands and that their traditional role was one purely of ‘Guardianship’. (On that score I am compassionate to their cause when you see the huge scars that are left after mining has run its course). But of cause they also have their other traditional familial belief of “What is yours is ours; what is ours is ours, Brudda”!

Double meaning intended.....it helps to keep the Lawyers fighting!

To overcome the opposition of the traditional owners to this proposal they will receive royalties on the ‘bulk’ removed, on the ore that is extracted from this bulk, on the amount of refined pure magnesium from the Refinery and be given shares in the Company’s prospectus! Not bad for a race that has little need or appreciation of monetary values! And can wisely invest it for their future generations and not piss it into the wind or up against the nearest tree!

But the question begs to be asked that if the ore was found on a “white” owned station or property, would he have the same rights or right to seek recompense.....I think not under the terms of the Commonwealth Resources and Minerals Act! From my understanding you don’t own what’s under the ground or above in the atmosphere.....and who is more likely to piss it into the wind?

As you must have surely surmised by now, my above treatise has little to do with the subject of the heading!.....Morning Exercise indeed!

I enjoyed my stay at Port Pirie for it was a town with a certain degree of vitality although its location could never be touted to be included in the “Prettiest Positions” list. Never mind, that vitality which was not evident even at Whyalla or for that matter in a lot of these little country towns and hamlets which cowered listlessly under the hot sun; where buildings had that ‘run down’ look; an air of ambivalence to on-going maintenance that wasn’t diminished by the evident friendliness of the inhabitants.

The ‘Town Beach’ had been hewed out of the surrounding mangroves in the Pirie Creek presumably with sand trucked in! The weather was turning with the mornings decidedly chilly....or they were by my standards in any case! But still the locals seemed impervious to this temperature change and there were a fair few stroking up the mangrove creek doing their morning constitutional

as I strode out lethargically and with little enthusiasm for my morning walk. This practice on my part decreased proportionately as the week progressed and the temperature dropped or so it seemed to my sensitive system.

My morning constitutional was always accompanied by the haunting tones of a beautiful male solo operatic aria wafting on the crisp air of the morn. It was quite beautifully sung, I supposed in Italian. I could not discern from which direction it came due to my shonky directional hearing problem. But I looked forward to the Scale Exercises. The tunes he sung seemed to vary each morning. The voice had power, range and feeling.

Of the swimmers there was one chap who seemed to persevere more than the other early morning 'stokers' and who alone, swam awkwardly further up the creek before turning to commence his homeward 'lap'. His swimming style lacked finesse or the appearance of professional training as his head bobbed like a cork in the water, never submerging or breaking through the surface of the water. His arm stroke lacked the powerful lunging arc but instead they swung lazily and alarmingly outwards from his body. He had no appearance of foot or leg kick instead relying on what propulsion he eked from his round-arm action.

Typical European Crawl!

On the last day that I persevered with this morning ritual (I'd like to be able to say that its termination was because I was to leave to continue my wanderings the next morning....but this was not the case....I was finding it harder and harder to get out of the warm bed!) I was passed by a group of power walkers.....well, they were walking faster than I....who I eventually caught up with again as they used those modern day equivalents to 'the rack' stretching apparatus. They all looked as though a heart attack was just around the corner by the strained and reddish hue of their faces, which also swayed me in my decision to discontinue this self-inflicted torture. I sat on one of those horizontal bars to catch my breath, have a smoke and watch this group as they inflicted painful excesses on various body muscles.

Mine were perfectly OK and I didn't need any further proof of their existence!

Some people seem to think that they need to have individual muscle groups scream in agony just to prove to themselves that they were there! Me, at my slow rate of progress along these same walkways could point to every one of my muscle groups and proudly boast that they were in an harmonious level with the rest of my body.....Flabby!

One of these dim witted but well honed muscled woman, in her late 50's early 60's, strutted over to me as though her entire leg muscle system was in spasm (although she reminded me the way she walked, of holding an apple between her legs in one of those raucous Sunday School Carnival races of long ago), to plop down beside me on the horizontal bar. She asked whether I had a spare smoke! You could have knocked me over with a feather! But then again, her muscles looked fit! We started talking between hefty drags to exercise our lungs. I explained my deficiency in directional hearing and wondered aloud on whether she too had or could hear the musical performance of the mysterious male opera singer that wafted across the creek the same time every morning.

'Oh yes', she said. 'It's beautiful isn't it? He does various operas and arias....he's been doing it for years; rain, hail or shine. An old Italian bloke.... That's him out swimming in the water.'

I turned to see my unstylish 'stroker' inch through the calm waters of the mangrove lined creek, head held high with his arms making an incongruous semi-arc as they appeared to listlessly come out of the water.

Now that's what I would call the ultimate 'morning exercise' program!

And bloody unselfish too as he at least was entertaining the other early morning 'exercise freaks' such as myself...while the 'Huff and Puff' brigade only littered, smelt up and congested the winding walking trails!

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26/03/01

SLIP, SLIDING AWAY!

I tootled around the New England high country and stayed at numerous National Parks and bush camping spots. Hardly saw a soul and was usually the only 'camper' in any one of these spots. The reason being was that it was bitterly cold and I was the only idiot foolhardy enough to brave the biting cold.

But no matter, nearly every campsite with a BBQ pit was amply provided with wood so I always had a roaring fire going in these small steel-sided BBQ pits....and I never saw a Ranger so that my stays were generally for free.

As the distances between the various Falls camping areas was not that great, you could de-camp one and be set up at the next within an hour or two and because I was the only intrepid camper (or perhaps the most stupid), I had the choice of any of the myriad sites available. I invariably chose the site that had its own BBQ plate, a good supply of firewood and offered the best view of a deep sheer-sided gorge which usually meant that I was camped at the edge of an abyss!

The camping area associated with Tia Falls was on a slope that had been tiered to provide 'stepped' sites that culminated in a sheer drop of some 75-100 metres onto the gorge bed below. These 'stepped' sites were accessed by a 'dirt track' that went straight up and down the slope of the land. I could have camped on the high ground but this was near the general car parking area and Tourist Bus turnaround area. It offered the same panorama of the falls and gorge area but to my twisted logic, did not provide the degree of privacy that one of the 'stepped' sites closest to the abyss provided. So I tootled down the dirt and grass covered track to the lowest tiered campsite, failing to see a sign at the beginning of the track advising "would-be campers not to negotiate the track or use any of the tiered area if it was wet or had been/was raining!"

I set up camp, got a supply of firewood and then went exploring.

It rained during the night! Also, the low temperature ensured that there was heavy dew on all surfaces...dirt track, grassed sections of track; on everything! After I made everything shipshape the following morning and began to drive off the 'tiered area' the troubles started! As soon as I turned the wheel to go from the tiered area onto the track going up the slope, the truck started to slip sideways towards the abyss that wasn't more than 20 metres away with no barrier, fence or raised ground in between. Even in 4WD there was no purchase and the situation only worsened when I tried this as the van left the relative safety of the level tiered ground and I think because of its weight only helped to slide the entire rig at a 45 degree angle to the track and further down the slope. Every time that I tried to drive up the slope, the truck wheels just spun on the long wet grass of the track and the truck and van slowly inched backwards. At least when I ceased trying to go up the slope, the rig remained stationary. It finally dawned on me that my endeavours to go up the slope only caused the opposite to occur and I was slowly running out of 'track'!

And getting closer and closer to the abyss!

I was stuck!!

I frantically got out of the truck, opened up one of the van's storage lockers and grabbed the timber lengths that I had stored there that I often used to level up the van, chock the wheels, etc. I laid the longer lengths of 150 by 50 directly behind the van wheels and chocked these lengths up with smaller timber to create a ramp effect of an angle that would stop the rig from 'free-falling' towards the abyss. I then hammered in some large tent pegs behind the 'packing timber' as further insurance to prevent these 'ramp sections' from slipping down the gradient. I then allowed the rig to reverse so that the van wheels were firmly anchored onto the base of each 'ramp'. All well and good....what do I do now?....the truck was pointing up the slope; the van was jack-knifed to the truck and at about 45 degrees across the track; the rig was now relatively safe but I was stuck with not a soul around.....

On the tier above the one where I had spent the night and adjacent to the track, was an old large tree stump. I tied the largest rope (about ½ inch diameter) that I had around this stump, connected the steel cable hook of the 2 tonne capacity, made in China, very cheap hand winch to the rope and the other end around the van A-frame. As insurance, I attached a 'tree protector' towing strap also around the stump and back to the A-frame of the van and took up the strain with the hand winch. I then disconnected the truck from the van and winched the van around so that it rotated on one wheel only. I then relocated the freed ramp from its location and re-positioned it hard under the rotated van wheel.

Luckily, the stump had taken the full strain and weight of the van. Furthermore, the capacity of the winch was 2 tonnes. The van fully loaded is just under 2 tonnes and with the added weight(?) caused by the slope of the land the capacity of the winch had to have been exceeded....but it didn't give up the ghost!!!

Bless those bloody Chinese manufacturers.....

Without the added weight of the van, the truck negotiated up the slope in 4WD quite easily and I reversed it onto another of the flat tiered sections 2 up from where I was. I took off the rope and strap from the stump and because of the distance now between the truck and the van, had to join the steel cable of the winch to the tree protector strap to achieve the required length. To be on the safe side, I tied my 'Snap-strap' to the bull-bar of the truck and back around the A-frame of the van. After winching 'in' about 3 feet of the cable I retied/re-strained the 'Snap strap' as an added precaution and 'safety net'. When finally, exhaustedly, I had winched in the length of the steel cable I relocated the ramp assemblies to under the van wheels, re-hammered in the steel tent pegs behind

them, disconnected the snap strap and towing strap and re-positioned the truck in a similar manner one or two tiers further up the slope. Because of the combined length of the steel cable and towing strap I could steer the caravan with little effort as I winched to keep it squarely on the track and not veering towards the truck.

Thankful for small mercies!

I forget how many times this laborious process had to be repeated....I think about 7 times!

During the whole process I vowed that I would not look up the hill as the distance still to go would only discourage and dishearten me. Instead I concentrated on the inch by inch progress of the van. I guess I was about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way up the slope when I happened to glance towards the Bus turning area to see one of those huge Interstate Tourist buses parked there and a line of Oriental Tourists standing shoulder to shoulder on the nearby kerb looking down at me and my endeavours.

All of them sipping tea or coffee or what-ever.

By this stage I had been at it for over 2 hours and was just about knackered.

I was in no mood for frivolity or civility.

I had no idea how long they had been there. But as I stood up and tried to ease my aching back, arms and shoulders they all smiled politely, bowed steeply and after straightening began clapping. Two of the gentlemen broke ranks and came down to where I was and offered me a cup of coffee. The Bus driver followed them down and offered me a cigarette which I thankfully accepted. We then had a long discussion on my plight, the pointing out of the 'Warning' sign, the hard work involved and a laugh at my stupidity and my very good luck at not being a pile of refuse at the bottom of the cliff. The Chinese gentlemen looked on with interested faces as though they understood every word spoken...which they didn't but the Driver/Captain would be asked through the interpreter to relay the details once they were on the road again.

The driver pointed out that on the next tier I could drive along its length and onto another track that was relatively flat which led through a stand of trees onto another tree-ed camping area. I hadn't noticed this but was eternally grateful as while we were talking I had added up the number of tiers left....there was 6 which meant at least 3 more "relocations" to laboriously negotiate.

I doubted very much that I would have done it!

The Tourists and Driver eventually went on their way with a friendly smile, polite oriental bows and a wave good luck from them all, a whine of diesel and a plume of diesel smoke.

I felt that all my muscles had frozen during my short period of inaction and found it decidedly more exhausting to get to that next tier level...but I eventually did.

Perhaps I should not have stopped and accept the offered coffee and a smoke!

I hooked the rig up and drove down the length of that tier onto a well graded track, through the stand of trees onto a large, level camping area dotted with large trees, large BBQ plates and table settings, plenty of firewood and possibly, arguably a better vista of the falls and gorge than I had had on my 'lower' tier position!

I had intended to hit the road once I had extricated myself from that ticklish situation but as I was

truly knackered to say the least I picked out a secluded BBQ setting (I don't know why there was still no-one around), positioned the van tight to the BBQ plate and table, didn't unhook the van but made it level with two of those large 150 by 50 'planks' under one of the wheels, made a cup of coffee, boiling the water on the roaring fire and fell asleep under the extended awning of the van.

I only awoke when the mid-afternoon chill aroused me to find I was almost surrounded by grazing and inquisitive Roos. I re-cranked up the BBQ, had an early tea sharing my story with a young English couple who had driven in in one of those Britz-Abroad small Campervans while I was asleep. A lovely cheerful couple who thought the temperature a bit mild!

I was in bed before dark to escape the bitter cold and to try and warm my tired and aching muscles.

pcb©

(May 1998)

THE SNAKE PIT

This was my 1st attempt of doing 'The Loop'.

I knew that I would have to return to the Central Coast to attend Kath and Tim's wedding in early 1988. I just called it 'The 1st Attempt' to give some continuance to my endeavours and achieve some logic for my Photograph Album!

Well....I reckon that makes sense.....!

This 'attempt' lasted 22 weeks, covered 12,000 kilometres, went up the East Coast to Townsville (where my Daughter was living with her future husband Mark), Mount Isa, Longreach, Cunnamulla, Bourke and then back home.

I suppose you could call it a 'long shake-down trip' prior to attempting 'The Big One'.

What-ever.....

I think I was on the Sunshine Coast when I was told by some like-minded fellow traveller of a beautiful 'little' National Park west of Mackay in Queensland called Eungella National Park. It was on the escarpment at the head of the Pioneer Valley which widened as it headed towards the coast and Mackay. The access road to the National Park up the side of the escarpment was very steep and windy and not suitable for caravans. But a 'pretty' little village nestled at its base called Finch Hatton that had a 'pretty' little Caravan Park run by a middle-aged, very friendly couple. The Van Park was quite reasonably priced.

So I was told.....

It was a beautiful part of Queensland totally without the typical Queenslander's need for 'glitz and glamour' or 'over-development' and it was all the better for it.

I had been informed that there was a 'bush' Saw Mill in the hinterland west of the National Park boundaries but within the neighbouring State forest that specialised in sawn-cut Red Cedar planking.

I just had to try and find it!

I spent 2 days trying to locate this 'mystical' Mill, spending a night tucked into my sleeping bag in the little 2 man tent that I had included for just such a 'sojourn' away from the van. I pitched the tent in a little grassed clearing beside a creek for the night.

In the end, after apparently driving right through the State Forest to emerge out into rich dairy country (da.....this is where the previously mentioned milk tanker originates from....!) I called into a farm close to the forest boundaries and was invited in for Tea and Scones....but instead asked for Coffee..... which seemed to put the Hosts' noses out of joint. They were a friendly couple though, getting on in years with their kids 'grewed' up and left having no interest in dairy farming.....it makes you wonder what will happen to the farms like this....and the whole farming Industry.... when these two are too old for it...and that wasn't that far away!

Once I had explained my purpose the old bloke advised that the Mill in question was about 10 kilometres back up the dirt road that I had just come down, turn right (south) down a lesser track for some 1 kilometre (about a mile) then east (left) onto what could only be described as a fire trail for about 1 mile (about 1 ½ kilometres) and the house and Mill was on the other side of a creek crossing under the shadow of a ridgeline.

Seemed way too complicated for me with all the mixing up of right turn...south....and a mixture of miles and kilometres!

"Won't do no good though"

"Why?" I asked.

"He got closed down by State Forestry for illegally takin' timber e' had nought licence t' take....'bout 2....maybe closeren 3 year back."

He turned to his Missus with a quizzical look on his face.

"Where'd 'e go Madge?"

"Dunno....I thinks to the Coast... 'e were old in any case...poor bugga....woulda been 'ard livin' up teer...no electric...tank water....bloody cold....by he'self....musta bin teer 'bout 20....maybe closer t' 30 years!"

Who gives a fig! I'd wasted 2 bloody days following a 'bum steer'!

He must have seen the look on my face as he turned to his Missus and informed her that he was going outside for a smoke.

"C'mon son, and bring ya coffee with ya."

I followed him outside, across the 'home yard', through a small fenced paddock lush with high grass into a bloody big farm shed. We walked through that and out under an attached awning almost

covering the same area as the 'shed'. He turned and went to a 'walled in' end.

"Madge don't care for smokin' in t' house."

He offered me one as I thought to myself that we had gone halfway to Mackay to ensure that smoke didn't waft into the house.

"How much ya reckon?" he asked as he nodded to a stack of logs carefully stacked with heavy cross-timbers to allow an even space between each log. The bottom row of 4 or 5 was braced with big, heavy timber chocks. The pile was about 5 high, each level solidly chocked. The logs were all around the same size, about 450-600mm in diameter and it looked as though all were around 6-8 metres long.

"Most of it's Red Cedar but tink one or two might be White Cedar...been airing for 'bout 30 years 'ear. Got some other stuff covered up behind der shed but ya only wantin' Cedar, right?"

My God...the logistics involved...and I didn't think airing it for 30 years as 'logs' would be good for it and would encourage radial stress cracking. To cut the logs into planks now may cause major cracking and destroy the usefulness of wide boards. Oh! What a quandary.....eventually, after 'toing and froing', the pull of the open road was stronger than my desire to stop, organise lifting, transportation, ripping, cutting down, storing and selling surplus. He did mention to me as a parting gesture as he stood beside my truck sucking on one of my cigarettes that I had offered as a return gesture, that if I wanted smaller timbers than all I had to do was drive around this Dairy district and look in the paddocks which were littered with fallen or cut Cedar logs and stumps.

Thus after suitable explanations and with promises to return if the opportunity arose, I headed back the way I'd come....back to the van at Finch Hatton and then the road north.

But instead of leaving the following morning I headed for the northern section of the National Park on the recommendation of a 'new neighbour' at the Van Park.

A dirt road but regularly graded, it was some 60 kilometres long winding steeply up a continuation of the escarpment that stood behind Finch Hatton ending in a large empty carpark. It was already a hot day and was going to get hotter. My eventual destination was a series of waterfalls and cascades which I had been told were a 'must see' by the enthusiastic neighbours. A well signposted (with distances clearly detailed) series of branched walking trails led to various 'scenic wonders' but my intended destination was some 8 kays round trip! It was hot and while I enjoyed the walk, often taking a branch trail if the sign-posted endpoint wasn't too far, I was only about the halfway point when I decided that the falls were just too far away in the heat.

The next sign informed me of some waterfall and splash pool only 100 metres down a side track.

'That'll do.' I thought to myself. 'I'll strip off, have a dip, a bit of lunch, a bit of a lounge in the sun to dry off then head back to the truck.'

I headed down the branch track looking forward to a rest and a swim.

The splash pool was about 40 metres long by half that wide and was fed by a small waterfall that had a drop of around 1 metre (pretty tame actually!) The end of the pool near the falls appeared to be deep with a gradual sloping up to the 'shallows' which feathered out onto a very large, slightly rounded rock ledge which curved then dropped away alarmingly as a precipice of about 50 metres.

I hadn't seen a soul in the 3 hours that I had been wandering along the walking trails so I sat down at the base of the 'staircase' and stripped naked, had some lunch and took in the view past the abyss. It was a narrow gorge with steeply sloping sides with the creek bed dropping away alarmingly. The steep sides of the gorge were heavily treed with a dense bush understorey typical of tropical vegetation layers.

After about ½ hour I was thoroughly warmed by the sun.....actually I was bloody hot so I decided to go for a swim. By the time that I had carefully sidled along the narrow edge so that the water was up to my ankles I realised that the water was bitterly cold....possibly feeling more so because of my time sun bathing.....as I sidled further I brace myself with my fingers clasping a narrow fissure in the rock face at about my shoulder height.

I was looking down at the smooth ledge wondering whether to continue or not as the water was about mid- calf now and getting colder if that was possible, when I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye.....I looked up quickly to notice that a snake was sliding along this narrow fissure towards my fingers....in fact was about 150 mm, no more than that, from them.....that was when this incredible 'slo-mo' mode kicked in.....as I started to lurch, nay spring backwards, the snake had commenced to slither over my fingers that were still in contact with the fissure.....I glanced to the right (I don't know why) and caught a glimpse of a little black and brown frog turn from the shallows and commence to swim into the depths.....in mid-arc, mid-air springing backwards my fingers were still securely locked to the rock fissure which meant that my arm had elasticised to be more than 3 metres long!!!.....all of a sudden my fingers popped off the rock and my arm snapped back to its natural length.....the release of my fingers must have startled the snake as it reared half its body length into the air searching for a vertical fissure to use as an escape route (I supposed)..... instead it lowered its upright length down to turn back on itself and began the arduous journey up the rock face.....just then I hit the water with all the air in my lungs bursting from them...I went under.....found the smooth rock bed of the pool with my feet with the water at this point being only about hip height..... I seemed to catapult myself back up onto the ledge that I had been standing on.....and immediately collided with the rock face.....it was like watching a film of a guy falling off a cliff in 'slo-mo' then hitting the Reverse Button to see him emerge from the water, glide up to again stand on the cliff top.....

The water was that bloody cold.....but the thing that truly amazed me when I thought about it later was the amount of detail that I absorbed....and retained burnt indelibly into my brain..... within which must have been a split second!

My heart was doing a thousand beats a minute; my ears were throbbing and roaring I guess from the increased heart rate; I was shaking all over and I had trouble telling my legs to hold me up (or else they would feel the iciness of the water again) with them having trouble obeying my demands!!!! Concurrent to this was discovering that I had a bloody brow, my brain was screaming....telling me to get the camera and take a shot of the snake as no-one will believe what had just transpired if I didn't.....unfortunately, this whole train of thought now escapes me. Who cares if no-one believed me!

But I did so and it amazes me that with all my shaking that I got several relatively 'focused' shots before the snake disappeared from view into a fissure.....it was about 1200 mm long, its body a dark green with a very light green belly. It had a small narrow head and slender body.

I went and laid down beside my gear shaking like a leaf and chain-smoked about 4 cigarettes, tried to pour the last of the coffee from my thermos into its top to drink with most of it spilling over the rock. I stayed in this position for some 30 minutes until my heart returned to normal, the shaking of my body lessened and my body became warm and dry. I re-dressed, packed all my gear up, checked

that I had not left anything behind (except for spilt coffee), swung my knapsack onto my back and began a slow return down the trail to my truck.

I must have been in some shock as when I had come across the idyllic scene I had planned to take some shots especially of the gorge falling rapidly down away from the splashpool and falls...but forgot to do so because of the state I was in.

I had the Car Park in sight where a Ranger was just getting out of a typical NPWS Toyota Ute not far from my truck. He must have seen my bloody brow as he approached and asked whether I was all right. I gave him a condensed description of the incident and after describing the snake asked him what type it may have been.

“Sounds like a harmless, non-venomous Tree Snake. All the Splash Pools up here are swarming with frogs and this encourages the snakes....mostly Tree Snakes like you saw.....it’s a wonder you didn’t see several swimming in the pool when you first got there....you usually do”.

A bloody harmless snake indeed.....it caused me a heap of harm!!!!

We shared a laugh and then I hopped in my truck and drove down off the escarpment.

As the road levelled out, I noticed a ‘Café’/Roadside Store that I’m sure wasn’t there on my way up.

I stopped as the sign boasted 12 flavours of locally made Ice Cream....I ended up ordering a cup of coffee and a sandwich which I took to a veranda attached to the side of the house/shop. There was only one other person sitting at the tables. A well dressed woman using the table to write into a Journal (I suspected).

We fell into conversation and after a while she invited me to her table.....I ended up staying there for several hours, both of us having several coffee top-ups and talking about many diverse things until we hit Politics.....it turned out that she was the Secretary of the local Chapter (?) for One Australia or what-ever....and an ardent follower/fan/adherent of Pauline Hanson who I am totally opposed to and consider her intrusion into Australian politics dangerous and volatile and reminiscent of the Nazi’s appearance and rise in Germany which was basically built on hate and distrust.

Thus ensued a 2 hour conversation that at times became heated, funny and/or serious.....

But that is another story.....

pcb©

29/10/97)

(That is the day that this episode occurred)

Written 20/05/2008 from surprisingly vivid memories with some referral to photos and Trip Journal.....

This ‘slo-mo’ experience was felt twice again in 1999.

Once whilst camping at the beautiful bushcamping area at Gumlon in Kakadu NP. A Goanna lunged at me from under the van as I was stepping up into it. I vaulted backwards to land on the top of the bullbar on the front of my truck which was nosed in about 2 metres under the Van awning. I would never in a million years be able to repeat the vault backwards!

The second time was when I was leaving Kakadu NP.

Running from an attacking croc and fleeing up a nearby tree for some time....but the thing that still sticks in my mind of the three incidents was the degree and vividness of minute details that were infused into my brain in those no more than 1 or 2 seconds of panic-stricken reaction.....!!!!???

IF IT GIVES YOU A GOOD FIGHT

I've always enjoyed fishing, but I guess it was in my 'middle' years that to wet a line meant more to me than catching fish. To stand on an empty beach with a couple of mates or to spend freezing nights by myself at Ocean's edge gave me a sense of solitude; of gratitude for the luck of living and a love of nature. A shared delight or a lonely pleasure, it mattered little. However, as my enthusiasm swelled for this past-time, the investment on fishing paraphernalia was inversely proportional to the number and the value of fish caught. I never took the giant step of investing in a boat of any kind, leaving that huge investment to those with bigger bank balances.....Eh, Phil?

Looking back over the stories that I have written while crawling my way around Australia, the majority have had that common theme on fishing or about fishing. So again, you are warned.....this little story is on the same topic!

I do not know when I firmly adopted a "Catch and Release" Philosophy but it was well before I started on my travels. It's not because I don't like Seafood because I love most of the harvest you can reap from the Ocean; it's not because the cleaning of fish made me queasy, it has never worried me; it's not that I don't or can't cook or BBQ a decent fish meal, because I have. I guess whilst travelling, the smell of fish cooking within my Van does tend to linger, to mix unfortunately with the stale smell of cigarette smoke. However, more importantly, stamped within my subconscious, is the fact that the number of fishing forays where I returned empty-handed did not cause the death by starvation of those that had foolishly depended on my success.

Also, everyone has heard the stories ad-nauseam of people whilst on holidays or whatever, returning from some fishing foray loaded to the gunnels with fish or netting more than their share of Prawns...or Oysters, only to be made sick by the ensuing feast. To have the family cat or dog or garbage can being the recipient of the majority of the dregs! I have always impatiently endured the stories of 'Old Timers' lamenting the inexplicable decline of fish numbers from their life-long habitual holiday destination. Never acknowledging the fact that they along with the other 10,000 Holiday Anglers may have had something to do with the depletion of marine stocks in that area;

instead, always wanting to blame illegal 'Netters', Immigrants or the Professional fisherman; never themselves or their half-century of mindless gorging!

I have long adopted the saying, "If it puts up a good fight, it deserves to live; to swim again"!

I tootled into Normanton with its famous purple Pub taking a photo of it at 11:30 in the morning while drunken Abs swore out their anger at 'having their souls robbed' whilst hanging precariously onto the veranda uprights or otherwise they'd fall to the kerb.

The bloody pub only opened about an hour before!

I pulled out onto the road (after 'topping up supplies') that headed north to Karumba about 70 kays away for no other reason than for the fact that that's where the road headed! I had heard that Karumba was a 'frontier town' nestled on the coast right in the south-east corner of the Gulf of Carpentaria and labelled the Prawn Capital of Australia and I thought it maybe worth a look. Come to think of it, I never had a prawn the whole time I was there...must have been the 'off' season!

I perused the 'Tourist Information Board' (this burg obviously not big or important enough to have its own Tourist Information Office), which indicated that there were a couple of Caravan Parks but only one on or near the water. The Sunset CP was situated just up from the bayside Pub, near the Boat ramp which was just upriver from the mouth of the small river (or large creek for want of a better description) that emptied into the bay; the Gulf of Carpentaria shoreline a short walk across the road from the van park. I puttered in that direction....not even thinking about Mossies, Midges or those big, ugly black sand flies of other northern climes.....but for the entire time that I was there, I had little or no problem at all with those 'biters'.....they must have an annual spray program.....what!....over half of the State!!!.....not likely!

The boat ramp parking area was 'chock-a-block' full of 4WDs and attached 'tinnie' trailers. I had never seen so many rigs in the one spot. There must have been over 150 parked haphazardly around the large, level, grassless area. Every form of 4WD with various sized and styled trailer. But the thing that stuck out the most to me was that the vast majority of 4WDs were of the 'Ute' persuasion and on the rear of nearly every one was some form of cooler, 'frig pack' or refrigerator unit...plus the ubiquitous dog or three!

I doodled into the Van Park on the Friday morning, paying for a 3 to 4 days stay (I cannot remember which), and set up camp under a scraggly Gum that gave me some speckled shade. The Park was about 50% occupied, the majority tents or such because of the propensity for 'tinnie trailer' towing around these parts. I took a 'walk of discovery' around the Park and along the shoreline later that day checking out the number of shore-based anglers, what they were using for bait and their 'hit' rate. There was surprisingly few Anglers burying their toes in the sand and those that were out were having a dismal time of it. It would appear that the only guaranteed fishing manner was by boat. I also was told later that several crocs had been seen sunning themselves at the mouth of the creek and a few large 'Salties' had been scared off from the 'Beach' within the last couple of weeks! The same beach that I had just walked along!

I wandered back to the Park's Reception Office to inquire about 'tinnie' hire and fishing tours. They advised that you got better results going on a 'fishing tour' (1/2 day tour \$60!.....but you don't come all this way not to) as you needed to know where the drop-offs, holes and reefs were...and beside, the Tourists hiring the 'tinnies' were not coming back with a lot of fish.....but why did I suspect that the CP was taking a 'commission' on the referral numbers! They did recommend one of the two Charter Boats that were available in town; the other was associated with the only other Caravan Park in town.....something 'fishy' afoot? And only about 10 'self-drive' tinnies available

which I thought was incredible....until you saw the volume of 'trailer rigs' in the car park....

What-ever...but I made the booking for the following morning which would leave at 7:30 am from the beach out front.

As I had headed north towards Normanton on the way to Karumba the day before, the Odometer ticked over to 170,000 and then 'gave up the ghost' refusing to turn over another kilometre. Because of the dismal inaccuracy of the 'gas and petrol gauges', I had relied on the odometer/tripmeter for an assessment of both LPG and Petrol reserves all through my travels and especially so in these remote areas where I really needed at least the 'tripmeter' operating. After settling in at the Sunset CP and organising the fishing charter for the following day, I asked about an Auto-Electrician. Following directions I arrived at his Workshop realising that he was the only Auto-electrician in town. He advised me that he couldn't fix the odometer/tripmeter which was the expertise of an Instrument Maker, the closest in either Cairns or Darwin! He could pull it out and send it to his preferred guy in Cairns but because next week-end was the Anzac Day long week-end and the one after (in Qld only) being the May Day long week-end, the time frame could be longer than 2 weeks with still no guarantee of a successful repair!!!

Aaaah!....AGAIN the victim of isolation and distance.....how many times did this happen during my travels.....?

I was most anxious in travelling any further especially if I did go to the locations that I had planned once I left Karumba without some indication of miles undertaken thus being able to determine my fuel capacity. Consequently, the following morning I removed the 'instrument cluster' from the dash board, removed the odometer/tripmeter from the cluster, cleaned out all the cogs, re-oiled/re-greased with Vaseline and stuck the thing back together again. And it worked.....I may have it checked in Darwin if it gives me any further troubles.....and it did but that is another story.....!

The only reason that I did this miraculous repair was because the 'charter' was delayed due to insufficient numbers...they required a minimum of 6 persons (they only had 3 including me) to break even. Eventually, the group grew to 5 (including myself) and the Owners relented and we boarded the vessel by wading out from the beach until the water was just about knee-deep before clambering aboard about 1:00 PM with a promise to be dropped back at the beach no later than 5:00.

The boat was a 'high-waisted' 35 foot (about 11 metres) Twin Cat; bright yellow hulled fibreglass brute powered by 2x200hp Yamaha motors with a substantial rear fishing 'well' completely covered with a sturdy fibre-glass canopy which was a continuation of the cabin roof. There was a forward cabin roof section which was difficult to get to and what the forward cabin housed I never found out but presumably a galley and 'head' at least. The main cabin or 'wheelhouse', was separated from the rear 'fishing platform' by two large refrigerated boxes and a small stainless steel 'cutting table'. Though open to the stern, the 'wheelhouse' contained all the bits and pieces including 3 radios, GPS, depth finder and some other paraphernalia which I couldn't identify. The owners had purchased the boat in Hawk's Nest (Port Stephens) and sailed it up over the top to here taking over 6 months to do so! Cruising idyllically through the Whitsundays for longer than they intended apparently!

The Owners were a couple named Pam and Al, married or not I never found out...but an item just the same. She was a well preserved, well stacked 40 'somethingish', a former licensee/bush pub Owner, an absolute dear with a delightful sense of humour and an infectious laugh. Al was similarly aged, a stocky, typical 'Bushie' type, a florid face with an open-pored, bulbous nose, leathery, tanned skin, an impish sense of fun and humour and the most wickedly foul tongue that I think I've

heard and having women as paying customers on board made nought bit of difference! I got on well with both of them.

Of the two other couples that went out that afternoon, one was a young couple doing a 'rushed' Loop of 3 months. They were from Perth...nice couple but quiet, seeming to like their own company more than anyone else's, obviously having been corralled into the trip and agreeing to placate others; the other couple were middle-aged, having pitched their rig beside me that morning....a Volvo station wagon and small 'Aerolite' van; from Melbourne and they doing 'The Loop' in record time and amazed at my lack of progress; he very well spoken except he had this 'off-putting' habit of when speaking, rolling his lips inwards as if it was a nervous tic; his missus definitely Pommie; both nice but somewhat aloof and 'proper'. They told me a couple of days later as we were both de-camping and I had strolled over to them to say hooroo and wish them safe travelling, that they had had an absolute 'ball' on the fishing trip.....an 'absolutely fun day' was how they described it...something that I was genuinely surprised with as I think Al had summed up very quickly the 'properness' of both of them and increased his swearing accordingly!

We went about 1-11/2 kays out in a depth of 3-5 metres, tried about 4 different spots and got a reasonable haul for the money.

I actually caught the first fish of 'keepable' size. This was after we all threw back about 30 various fish of sizes that if we had caught them in the southern 'latitudes' would have had us salivating for months....as I held the fish for photographic 'proof of purchase' I explained my 'Catch and Release' philosophy but seeing as how that was the first of 'reasonable size' would keep it and who-ever wanted it at the end of the day could have it....we all got 3-4 Salmon each around 900 mm long, countless Sharks from 300-900 mm long, a heap of Catfish which Al killed before chucking them overboard, about 6 "skippy" Salmon throwbacks and 2 small 'steelback' Salmon.

As typically happens, when you get back to the Van Park and begin cleaning and filleting the fish, a crowd soon congregates. Apparently Al always comes supposedly to show 'Us Southerners' how to handle and fillet these monsters...but I suspect that he does it to 'drum up' business as he told me later that the 'Tinnie throng' and 'self-drivers' caught SFA that day.....and he had 3 bookings for the following day before we had even cleaned the lot! There was about 30-40 fillets by the time we'd finished. It was hard work and we must have drunk around 2 or 3 cans each all shouted by Al by the time we finished. When it became obvious to the 'throng' that I was not even keeping any fillets, they were amazed....and when I explained my 'catch and release' philosophy', they were flabbergasted....and were not appeased in any way by Al's complete agreement with it!

The following day was Anzac Day (25/4/99). I went for a morning stroll, caught up on some washing and cleaned out the van. Even though the 'beach fishing' did not hold much promise I started to 'rig up' my beach rod which I hadn't used since Northern NSW about 18 months previously when the Proprietor of the CP walked over to ask whether I'd be interested in going out again as they only had the 3 bookings. I agreed but by the time we boarded the boat around 1:00, there was 7 of us and I wondered again on the questionable methods of 'corralling' clientele!

We went about 5 kays out with the water depth increasing to around 3-5 metres!

It sure does 'drop off' suddenly up here!

Again we located to about 1/2 dozen different spots catching only 'throwback' and unwanted species. Again I was the first to catch the first 'keepable' sized fish....a 'Grunter'...good size....put up a good fight. I would have preferred to throw it back but as it was the first and you never knew what kind of day lay ahead, I put it into the 'catch-box' as I explained to my fellow fisherpersons my

philosophy. Generously donating the fish to the most unsuccessful person of the day.

This bought a howl of dissension from two young blokes, obviously mates, who were with us. Both had that same 'red-necked' parochial outlook common to a lot of Queenslanders. They were both above average height, rangy, dirty looking with 5 day growths, looked slightly emancipated and of limited intelligence and senses of humour, with gaping mouths and missing teeth. They had the attitude (widely supported by the 'breed') that Queensland was the centre of the universe and that the rest of Australia was filled with Abo loving, smart-arsed, commie-greenies! They and they alone had the right to do what they wanted, when they wanted, take what they wanted when they wanted and stuff all generations to come.....

Anyhow.....

The day was similar to the day before with about the same proportion of 'throwbacks', bashed to death Catfish and good sized fish thrown into the 'Catch Bin' except that a 1500 mm Hammerhead Shark was landed. As the guy was 'playing' the shark....took about 10-15 minutes to land...Al requested that all other lines be wound in so as not to cause line 'wrap' and/or line 'snap'. Again this bought a howl of dissension not only from the two young blokes but several other obvious Qld'ers. Swearing like a trooper Al threatened to throw all the 'Objectors' into the Inflatable (which was securely lashed to the canopy above us) and cast them adrift.....which quietened the less vocal but further threats were needed before all lines were brought in.

Regardless of the fracas, again it was a 'rewarding' day and well worth the money.

A similar crowd gathered at the Van Park as the day's take was cleaned, filleted and 'divvied up' with me again refusing my share. This caused louder howls of 'stir' questioning my lineage and political persuasion.....while I tended to ignore it, Al again took the fight to the 'rednecks' at times both agreeing and disagreeing with the 'rabble'. It simmered down to a light-hearted 'stir' with me throwing my '2 bob's worth' but there was still a few who continued to throw barbed comments.

I went into the Park's Office which was also a small 'General Store' just before closing time to buy some bait (I thought I may try a bit of 'beach fishing the following day) and was greeted with light-hearted banter from both the Proprietor's wife and a pretty young 'off-sider' about the 'ace fisherman who would prefer to let the poor little fishies live....'

Aaah....my reputation precedes me....

Just after sun-up the next morning I went for a walk on the 'beach' to look for 'likely' spots to cast a line later. The 'beach' for the length that I walked, was lucky to be 6 metres wide....there was usually either a clay bank and then dense bush or 'sand flats' with mangroves on 'trestled legs' going back as far as you could see. You could only walk that way as the creek, dense mangroved banks and further up, the 'town dock area', was in the other direction. I kept one eye and ear acutely tuned for any noises or movement that may emanate from the bush/brush....crocodiles.....you know.....you never, ever get between a croc and the water.....

Did the 'walk'.....no slides....but then again I wouldn't know a croc slide from a slippery-dip at Luna Park....!

Walked about 1 ½ kays 'up' the beach which was mainly sand but at a few locations large (in area), flat, smooth rock ledges standing about 150-200 mm proud of the sand protruded out into the water. It was firm sedimentary rock which was embedded with thousands upon thousands of tiny sea-

shells. Turning to re-tread my route back, I approached a little bloke now standing at the water's edge fishing....turned out to be a little old woman travelling by herself in a Campervan doing "The Loop" in a clockwise direction. Sweet old thing, rubbery face with a very dry sense of humour....wasn't catching a thing; didn't know a 'poddy' mullet from a 'mudskipper'! As she was from Brisbane I replied that she should surely know what a 'mudskipper' was.....stood chatting with her for about an hour....mostly on our travels; what pisses us off, etc; while she cast only about 3 metres out (I could cast a spit further!) into about 6 inches of water I guessed, waiting less than 30 seconds with no bite before repeating the process 'ad nausea' as we chatted....constantly complaining of the lack of bites! A lovely old dear, full of life and laughter. She wore a leather 'swagman's' hat turned up like a Diggers Slouch hat but on both sides as though she was unsure which hand to 'present' her .303 on...

Continued back along the beach to sit near the boat ramp catching my breathe, watching numerous 'tinnies' being launched and 'forever hopefuls' fishing from the beach further up. Earlier I had noticed the Twincat moored near the entrance of the creek but it was no longer there....must have got an early start....when it came 'spluttering' in sight from around the mangrove fringe from upstream. It nosed into the boat ramp, Pam standing on the bow cabin roof.

"Come on," she called. "Climb aboard". I shouted that I had expended my budget on the previous 2 days' trips. "No effin' probs," shouted Al as he stuck his head out. "Get ya effin arse into effin' gear and get the F into the effin' boat and effin' join us....we just effin goin' for a effin' joy effin ride....no effin charge!"

I jumped at it! He reversed the boat away from the boat ramp around towards the sandy stretch and I hopped up onto the wide transom and vaulted over the rail into the stern well.

They'd gone upstream to the docks to pick up two friends from Melbourne.

I was introduced to Jack and Beryl.

They originally hailed from Budgewoi but sold up and moved to Mornington in Vic. This was rather ironic as Jack was the spitting image of Harold Holt and thoroughly sick and tired of this observation. They had moved there to be close to the Grandkids but they had an 'onsite cabin and annex' in the park and spent over 6 months of the year away from the revolting southern winters. He had a dry quick wit and a loud laugh. Beryl was a stout lady who had lost a leg in a car accident 7 years back and now had a prosthetic leg. Her other leg had also been damaged and she had had numerous operations, the latest a knee replacement only weeks before travelling up here and still wore a brace on that knee...hence the boarding at the 'town dock'. She was one gutsy lady who laughed off any hints of sympathy or help. And when the four of them got going they all could be very crude...funny but crude....I seemed to fit in quite well when this occurred.....

We left around 9:30 not getting back til close on 6 that night...but what a day.....

We raced 'full bore' for over 7 kays out into the Gulf. The purpose of the trip was not a 'joy ride' but to explore for new holes, reefs, bars and gutters that may have been made/exposed during the last 'wet' (that had only just finished....supposedly...but that's another story)....checking out these positions for possible 'future charter spots' by throwing a line in....Al would throttle back over a likely area keeping a third eye (with Pam) on the Depth finder and separate Fish finder. If it showed promise we'd all frantically chuck a line in. I stood on the transom, the position I had adopted the day before much to the chagrin of my fellow anglers. Al would keep an eye on what we pulled in. If the species was varied and large fish were being hooked, Al would 'spot' the position on the GPS, recording fish species and size caught, the time and direction of the tide and wind and weather

conditions, etc,.....and this only stopped when we cut engines and drifted while we had lunch.....my shoulders, upper arms and back were sore even then.....but.....but we were hooking into much larger fish than we had kept the two previous days; we were hooking up at least twice as many over-all; and the variety of species was also greater.....but we were never in water deeper than 7.5 maybe tops 8 metres!

The most repetitive command that Al had yelled the previous two days was not to touch the effin' drag setting.....every rod/reel combo on board had either 30 kg or 50 kg line. The drag setting was such that if you tried to pull line through yourself you inevitably ended up with the line slicing through your hand with none being released from the reel...that's how 'hard' the drag was set.....but some of the 'big' ones we hooked that day sent the line 'whizzing' out against the drag.

After lunch I'd changed over to a 'game-fishing sized' Baitcaster overhead rod and reel just to try and hurt a different combination of muscles in my shoulders when suddenly the line screamed, racing off the reel at an alarming rate.....Al yelled out, "let the effer run, she'll effin stop in an effin sec or two....when she effin does pump an effin wind with all ya effin strength!" The others pulled in their lines. The fish sped off then stopped, sped off then stopped maybe 4 or 5 times while I tried my hardest to re-coup some of the line out....which was quite a bit!!! Eventually, the speed of the out-going line was about equal to my efforts to retrieve and Al stated that it was tiring and would soon begin to circle....which it did but because of the canopy uprights I had to pass the rod to Al each time.....but he always gave it back....it was my effin hook-up.....I eventually was standing on the for'ard cabin roof with one leg braced against the 'hand hold' bar pumping and winding the fish closer to the boat.

I had it heading for the boat as occasionally you could see surface ripples and colour about 50 metres away.....when it must have suddenly flipped and headed out again. There was this almighty snap and I fell heavily backwards onto the cabin roof, almost doing a double backward roll and falling into the drink....but Al, who I hadn't noticed was now behind me grabbing me before I got too close to the side of the boat. I still held onto the rod which was now broken, as was the line....I was apoplectic but filled with remorse, apologising profusely for the broken reel and the loss of such a large fish. "Not a effin prob....it was a effin old rod seen effin better days...don't effin worry and keep ya effin money ..ya not effin payin' for its effin re-effin-placement....ya couldn't effin afford it in any effin case.....effin Mackerel that size (he reckoned about 1800 mm well over 75 kgs) tasted effin shit too! No more effin talk about it..."

But they all stirred the 'hell' out of me for the rest of the day!

(Thinking about it now as I am writing this, I can't fathom why Al didn't start up the motors to 'idle speed' and just turn the boat astern to the fish all the time as the transom had an upturned edge to allow you to brace your feet and you could lean back against the rear railing line for added leverage.....I think it may have been his warped sense of humour as he would have known the outcome as there was no way you could have landed that fish from the for'ard position.....only from the transom at the stern of the boat could you land a fish the size that we thought it was).

We continued on our way spotting and hauling in fish and throwing them back....my back, shoulders and arms screaming in pain by the end of the day. But the 'catch box' was full with about 13 big fish, mostly Grunter which they said was the best tasting fish, maybe a Salmon, a small 1100 mm Mackerel which I had caught earlier in the day and a Coral Trout. They would keep 2 of the Grunters each, the rest Al would sell to the Pub cafe and local Chinese Restaurant. If there was any left, he would sell at the Caravan Park....either way he'd come out just about even for the day 'except for the effin rod' said with a smile. On every charter he did the same thing, only keeping at the most 2 fish for he and Pam and selling the rest for 'effin drink money'.

What a grand, grand day it turned out to be....

I'd caught three times as much fish on this day than my entire life before, I'd had a great lunch, drank a lot of Al's beloved 4X, never laughed so much and enjoyed the company of the four of them immensely.....all for nothing.....

As they would have to disembark Beryl at the dock before she, Jack and Al returned to the Park so Al could clean and fillet the fish in front of the envious rabble, I asked first to be dropped near the pub. I bought 2 slabs of 4X and met them in the Park as Al was laying out 'the catch' for all to see on the cleaning table....and the word got around quickly of the size of the catch....and it wasn't long before the 'humorous' barbs were directed at me....

I pointed my filleting knife at one of the young blokes who was the most boisterous and had been with us the previous day.

"Tell me mate, what is the largest fish you've caught?"

He replied, giving some detail to the whoops of encouragement from his mates.

"What did it taste like?" I asked after he had completed his description of the 'catch of the century'. He was a bit nonplus by my question and couldn't really answer.

"For the rest of your life you will remember the 'catching' of it....but you've already forgotten the taste of it....wouldn't it have been better if you'da thrown it back....you never know....you might have one day in the future caught it again...when it was bigger....and you would get a greater thrill....and ya can bet that it would have spawned hundreds if not thousands of fingerlings."

More whoops and whistles, more humorous asides and stirs now aimed at the young bloke and not just me.

"The East Coast is all but fished out....the damage caused by Fisherman like you and me takin', takin' more'n his share."

This bought further uproar from the rabble.

"Just think about it.....there are about 200,000 tourists go through this town each year...include ya'selves in that.....most during the 'dry'....let's be ultra-conservative and say they stay on average 3 days each.....and only 25% going fishing twice in the 3 days.....each person catches say 2 fish each time..... that's 200,000 fish in an 8 month period.....let's say each fish weighs 2 kg and that's bloody small from what I've seen....that's about 40 tonne of fish taken by guys like you and I and I'd say that's not much less than the professional guys are allowed to take..... and their catches are policed a lot tighter than yours or mine.....if you don't want this area to become like the East Coast than I reckon ya should be a little more circumspect and admit that half the fish ya take home in those frigs on the back of your utes ends up being tossed because ya sick and tired of fish every second meal just to try and finish the lot or it's given to your cat.....!"

The stamping of feet, downward glances and a lessening of interjection telling me that these figures had had an effect on them....even Al and Jack were taken aback by my quick tabulations.....

I carried on. "I've been divorced a long time... and looking at youse, I'd say most of you too.....I can remember my Solicitor telling me it was going to cost ME for my wife to divorce me....and I can remember me wife telling me that she was going to take me 'to the Cleaners'!"

Nods of agreement and expletives to ex-wives the world over thickened the air.

“I coulda gone mad in those days....takin’ a gun....you know what I mean.....but I was young and I knew that I had some good days....like to-day....ahead me so I adopted the attitude..... if she’s given ya a good fight.....she’s earned the right to be let go!”

This the majority seemed to comprehend more than the Maths as most could see the parallel and the humour in it.....and apparently I turned from being the ‘big L, Commie/greenie from down south’ to become ‘The Preacher’.....

We finished off the filleting, bagging most of it for Al and followed Jack to his cabin to sit outside with the 2 of them and Al having a couple more beers. Al had gotten 6 reservations for to-morrow while Jack and I had cleaned and filleted. Al wanted me to come along (no payment) on the charter the next day as an ‘honorary deckhand.’ (I somehow thought that Al invited me along to liven things up....and to reinforce the ‘catch and release’ philosophy after the ‘Yahoos’ had kept no more than 2 fish each!) I declined stating that my shoulders and back needed a rest after to-day and beside, I had planned to be on the road again to-morrow.

He shook my hand and wished me the best, told Jack to mind those slabs...he’d be back shortly and sauntered off with his fillets of fish towards the Pub. Jack and Beryl invited me to stay for tea saying that it was more’n my fish than theirs but I declined saying that I had a nice bit of Rump and a couple of snags out for tea....but promising them that I’d drop into their Cabin for a cup of coffee and a cheerio chat before setting out the next morning.

And I kept my promise....

pcb©

(24/4/99)

*Those 4 days and those 4 people
that I met in Karumba are at
the top of “the best” list of my travels.....*

*(Written 25/5/2008 from fond foggy memories
and constant referral to my photos and Journal)*

A SURPRISING OASIS

*(THE FOLLOWING IS MORE OR LESS A DIRECT TRANSCRIPTION FROM MY TRIP JOURNAL)
(28/04/99 to 01/05/99)*

I drove south out of Karumba after spending 4 fantastic days and meeting 4 wonderful people there. Again stopped at Normanton to re-supply at the cavernous, rickety, historical Burns, Phelps & Co. Warehouse come Supermarket and Distribution Warehouse; stacked the supplies away in the van and for some reason took a walk around the 'Burg'. Ended up down beside the river not far from where my rig was parked just down from the 'Supermarket'. A clean, pretty little area with several picnic tables, roofed gas BBQ plates and where a sign proclaimed that Caravans, Campervans and Motorhomes were allowed to stay in this 'Rest Area' for a maximum of 24 hours...presumably there was a caravan park some where in close proximity. Fell into a chat with a 'worse for wear' Retiree and his wife. Swapped 'travel adventures' and points of recommendation, mentioning that I had intended heading first to Burketown further west on the Gulf coast, then down to Lawn Hill NP.

Burketown was a 'no-go'.....had been isolated for just over 2 months now and expected to be another 4 weeks at least before Roadtrains might get in with essentials. Apparently the residents were on the verge of open revolt not because food essentials and water were in short supply (they were reaching critical levels and air-drops were being planned) but because they had run out of beer!

Drove off a little dejectedly after he informed me that Lawn Hill was still isolated with 8 vehicles still caught in there; their occupants 'helicoptered' out last Wednesday.

The truck went well; with a fresh to strong SE wind acting as a 90 degree crosswind on the way to the Burke and Wills Roadhouse. Incredible country.....you pass through poor rocky, scrubby country (but still green....they had ½ to 1 inch of rain last week and over the long week-end just passed), through flat, absolutely flat treeless plains where the grass was higher than the truck (!! also green, on a one-lane 'tar-topped' straight as an arrow road where again the marked 'Floodways' appeared at times to be higher than the road! Or where you came to a hill of hardly noticeable gradient the marked 'Floodway' appeared to be halfway up the hill.....on a straight road as far as you could see!!

Very strange.

B & W RH was 'attended' by 2 luscious young nubile, one just under 1800 mm tall with shorts that showed her legs beginning at her chin; the other with a satin, western-style vest on.....she had a lovely face.....I half expected a 'lap dance show'. But I couldn't for the life of me figure out why two beauties so dressed would be here in such an out-of-the-way place...and I was too taken up with looking at the scenery to ask that pertinent question and if I had been able to cast my eyes in another direction say onto the large glass fronted building, my question would have been answered! The bowsers were permanently 'padlocked'!!!

Too many times bitten apparently; with people filling up then disappearing down the 'tarmac' without paying.

But it was a lovely view watching 'long legs' fill 'me up', the jerry cans and checking the oil!

The RH was at a 4 way intersection (I doubt that it would ever need a set of traffic lights installed because of traffic volume), and after paying for the fuel took the right hand road to head northwest on a similar black 'strand'. Everywhere there was signs of the road being damaged from the recent

‘wet’ which according to some locals that you spoke to wasn’t over yet!.....sending a chill to my bones and conjuring up images of me being ‘cut-off’ with water waist high as I ‘camped’ beside some, until nightfall, dry creek bed absolutely miles from anywhere or anyone!

As I have said before, these Development Roads were one lane blacktop with anywhere between ½ to 2 lanes wide dirt shoulder either side.....and because of the ‘wet’, these dirt shoulders were surprisingly ‘spongy’ and ‘boggy’. It is with a great deal of relief that I say that from Normanton to B & W RH (about 200 kays) and from the RH to where I am now pitched for the night (100 kays) I only had to deviate off the blacktop onto the ‘shoulders’ about 10 times and luckily only twice where I had to get right off and stop while the 3 ‘trailer’ Mobil Tanker Roadtrain had unimpeded access on the blacktop....if it had deviated onto the shoulders it would have been ‘history’. Luckily in both instances I was amply fore-warned of their approach by sight and by UHF radio and was able to ‘choose’ a safer position to deviate off the tarmac.....even then one spot was decidedly ‘iffy’ with the heavy black soil very ‘gunky’!

That also was surprising.....the ‘patchwork’ quality of the soils....from heavy black soils, loamy silty souls, dry brown clayey soils to the ubiquitous red shit!!

I passed, or should I say I was stopped on two occasions by separate ‘cattle drives’. The first one about 10 kays north of the B & W RH. There must have been about 2,000 head of cattle; both sides of the road were awash with movement and carcasses. A young bloke (a ‘Bronzed Aussie’ personified) on a sweating but beautiful stock-horse stopped me, cantered up to the side of the truck and politely asked me if it was alright if I waited about 5-10 minutes to allow the mob to cross in front of me.....

“Not a problem.”

I turned the motor off.....the bloody camera was in the van!

A bloke in his ‘canvas filled-in’ Toyota Ute and ‘Tinnie Trailer’ behind crawled around me and started edging forward towards the milling mass causing the cattle to turn each and every way. Another more older bloke, extremely ‘stately’ on a huge chestnut stallion (you could tell), a beautiful looking fresh horse rode up at a canter onto the middle of the road in front of these ‘yobos’ who incidentally were camped near me at Karumba Sunset CP for one night. The bloke on the horse was calling to his dogs, directing them like a Field Marshal placing troops to counter-attack the turning throng, cracking his whip frantically, very apparent at one stage directly at the ‘yobos’ truck....very pointed...very upset....

Now the sun is going down there’s a bit of a chill in the air....

I’m about 20 metres off the road beside a waterhole....a cacophony of whirling birds, the sky a light blue above me, a distinct pink turning to magenta on the eastern skyline....beautiful!

All I need now is a swarm of insects (which will come if I turn the outside light on), a couple of slithering snakes or worse, a mob of cattle led by a rampaging bull having smelt the scent of water.....there is a mob around somewhere nearby; I can hear them.

I reckon that it had to be under 10°C last night and I was forced to ‘break out’ the Doona and blanket again it was that cold. I suppose that you must expect it with the clear, cloudless skies that we have been experiencing.

There are certain places you learn to avoid when ‘bushcamping’ out in the ‘boon docks and other

remote areas like this....dry river beds or on the banks of flowing rivers (up here in any case), beneath trees having a propensity to drop limbs without warning i.e.: River Red Gums and Sydney Blue Gums....on or near Bull Ant/Bull-Joe nests, too near waterholes or Artesian Bores in cattle country or too close to the only road to anywhere.....!

While I have not encountered that many Roadtrains compared to horrifying stories told to me by 'fellow' travellers, I have encountered maybe a dozen in travelling west to Normanton/Karumba/Gregory Downs. It would appear that they are predominately a night species. At least a dozen have gone past during the night with at least 3 releasing their air-brakes as they fly through! In the still of the night that is some sound!

As I said before, after leaving B & W RH and travelling WNW, the landscape is basically flat with very few creeks or stream beds. There are a number of large rivers i.e.: Leichhardt, Flinders and Gregory in this area which are well below the level of the surrounding countryside...about 6-8 metres in fact. Now that the 'wet' is over (hopefully), a series of rivulets crisscrossing and meandering between sandbanks and mudflats now clearly visible is all that remains of these raging torrents at the 'peak' of the 'Wet'. The steep banks of the main river course is usually heavily timbered with all sorts of trees (OK...I don't know half the species!), fallen logs, scrub and rocks haphazardly spread over the stream bed between these sharply rising banks. What there is for the most part between these river systems is a myriad collection of 'floodways'. You can't go more than 3 kilometres without encountering the ubiquitous signage where either the road 'dips' slightly 1-2 metres max. for 50-300 metres or where the road is built up with pipes or concrete box culvert sections underneath. For the greater part, the road is nearly always built up from the surrounding countryside, sometimes as little as 300 mm; sometimes several metres with the channel so formed being flat, grassless sections anywhere from 50-100 metres wide also acting as a floodway.....you don't park or camp in them for fear of flash-flooding or even now, boggy ground.

Yep...you guessed it....that's where I 'pitched' for the night. A quick walkabout along the road for about 100 metres just on sunset (it was bitterly cold) bought me to 'one of those signs'. Looking back to the van, the floodway was quite clearly defined but I'd like to say less so last night when I decided to 'pitch' there.....aah, well! It didn't rain anywhere in Qld last night except in North Cape York Peninsular!

I'm about 3 kays west of the Leichhardt River into which these 'floodways' drain.

The other thing that I've noticed as I travelled, is that once you make the decision to stop and bushcamp for the night, it can be anywhere between ½-1 hour before you spy a suitable spot. Inevitably you often go past a pleasant spot but because of the road you're not able to U-turn. Once you have made the decision, located the spot, checked it out by walking around/through it and then pitching camp staying the night, invariably you find the next morning when you 'hit' the road that you spy a more salubrious site 1-5 kilometres up the road....with shady trees, off the floodway and 'miles' off the road!

Not long after de-camping this morning and while driving across a treeless grassy plain on a slightly elevated section of road a freshly killed kangaroo was partially splayed across the middle of the road.....

THE REST OF THIS LITTLE STORY IS DELIGHTFULLY DESCRIBED IN THE SHORT STORY "A SUCCESSFUL PHOTO-SHOOT"

I've seen 5 snakes to-day, more than my entire travel thus far....all laboriously wending their way over the road in front of me. Only to be forced into a rapid slithering retreat or a frenzied 'whip'

across to the other side of the road as I drew close. I slowed down always and adjusted my progress to ensure their survival...aah...the NSW Greenie.....now with short hair!

Gregory Downs is also at a 4-way intersection and is basically a Pub, 3 bowzers and a couple of sheds.....that's it! But stopping there for fuel, I got into a conversation with 6 other caravanners travelling around together, there also for fuel and a brief stop. The conversation went from 'must sees', the conditions of the roads ahead/behind to finish on the attributes of my 'neat' Off-Roader.....the Roadstar saga brings out the best in me!!!

One of the caravanning couples was from Warners Bay; another from Toukley....what is it about the Central Coast that forces people to migrate thousands of kilometres....or is it that Central Coasters are more adventurous.....?

Nah!!.....it must have the highest proportion of early 'Retirees' and 'Packages' in the nation!!

From Gregory Downs to Lawn Hill NP is 96 kays of dirt....the caravanning troupe that I conversed with at the 'bowzers' were not going into Lawn Hill because of the state of the road and several creek crossings and boggy detours....all damaged and as not repaired. They had taken a 'squiz' at the alternate 'temporary' side-track across the Gregory River about 3 kays out along the Lawn Hill track from Gregory Downs and had been immediately 'put off.'

Your intrepid author had 'no problems' well....OK....just a little.

Most of the track in from the river had dried out and you created a cocky's comb of dust behind you even at 30 kph! It was only when the road dipped for a creek crossing (there was more than 2 but perhaps again some were just floodways) that the dust gave way to slippery, sticky red clay!

Once you passed the Gregory River detour, the road was a wide, well-maintained dirt road for around 50 kilometres that serviced the recently opened Century Zinc and gold mine (?). Not that far past the mine T/O you hit the eastern boundary of the Lawn Hill National Park.

The rutted track deteriorates badly!!!!!!

The Lawn Hill Rangers Accommodation and Information Building was an impressive structure with the camping area also well thought out being a series of loops with indented camping or caravan positions.

The 'indents' and route of the loop roads identified with tree stumps and logs positioned on the ground. There were about 100 camping positions and the 'farthest outer loop' was for those caravanners and campervanners that used portable generators.

From almost dead flat terrain for close on 300 kays you are now surrounded by red soiled, mottled vegetated 'hills'. A cursory examination that afternoon promised better things to come....

It would appear that my 'pet' travelling companion has vacated. Hopefully he has left to start a colony of geckoes somewhere along the track but alas, I fear he may have succumbed to a more dastardly end either frozen to death on one of the last two nights; or choked to death on dust; or become a morsel to the marauding Kites or some such species.....

My left shoulder and arm are worse, giving constant pain now and I am unable to rotate my arm or move my left side without pain....it has gotten worse. Also I am bleeding fresh blood from my arse....it's just a cranky pile....

It was another cold night and I had a lousy night's sleep. I couldn't get comfortable. Even though the shoulder and arm have given me heaps over the years, am now in constant pain and have no power or rotation. Took 6 Panadol last night with only minimal effect...will have to start on the Port!!

There's been little dust entry into the van which is good considering the Cocky's Comb of yesterday.

Did the Middle Gorge loop, the Indarri Waterfall loop both around 3 kays return....and I'm buggered....it took about 3 ½ hours. It's surprising how deep this gorge complex is...about 50-70 metres deep, in parts sheer red sandstone (or perhaps Ironstone) cliffs, scabbled, eroded and excoriated cliff-faces with the 'heights' covered with withered and sparse trees with clump Spinifex appearing to be the only ground cover. But within 6 metres of the water's edge the vegetation is lush and dense with Ghost and White Gum with several species of Palm both short and tall. The waterways and pools are alive with fish and turtles and I even saw something that looked like a Garfish!

Rugged, spectacular country....

I will enjoy exploring more of this place over the coming days....

I sat outside the van and had tea.

I was joined again by the cheeky Willy Wagtail who this time came and perched on the chair's armrest as though 'miffed' that I hadn't fed him any 'crumbs'.

The wallaroos (or Wallabies...or small Roos...I don't know) were circling, heading towards the sweetness of the 'lawn' that was watered every afternoon by the Rangers.

As I sat under the awning of the van I spotted about 12 different species of birds from a Black Kite, Sulphur-crested Cockatoos, Pallid Cockatoo, Crimson Finch and several others that remain a mystery.

A slight breeze, wispy high cloud; looks like another chilly night.

I will do the 'Northern (lower) Gorge' walk to-morrow morning before breakfast....

I slept better last night. My usual nightly wake at 2:00 and 4:00 am still occurred but my shoulder and arm weren't in constant pain....maybe it was the Port! I can bring my arm to shoulder height in front and to the side but can't rotate the arm through 360 degrees without pain. But at least the shooting pain down to and in my elbow which happens when at its worse, has gone. Maybe just the rest from driving does the trick....I'm still on the same bottle of gas and the battery seems to be holding. Admittedly I cook tea on the BBQ (with its separate gas bottle) and only use the van stove for boiling drinking water/heating water for washing up my cooking/eating things....at night I boil the 'billy' (for washing up and coffee) simultaneously as I cook on the Barby...this must help.

To think that the greatest component of energy used is for the heating of water.....crazy!!

There has to be a better way!

I did the 'walk' around 'The Cascades', the Aboriginal 'art wall' with one of the Rangers as

interpreter that was required as not even the local Abo tribe could decipher them! To explain this situation we are told that the 'Rock Art' pre-dated the legends of the present 'tribe' (who I reckon are too pissed to even find the bloody cliff let alone what was supposedly drawn on it! Or what it supposedly represents.....do I sound cynical?) and are assessed at between 17-25,000 years old. You really had to look hard (and use a little.....nay....a lot of imagination) to actually recognise the motifs.....but then again, if Da Vinci's 'Mona Lisa' or Pollards 'Blue Poles' were left out in the open that long, there'd be nothing to appreciate either(?). At one point an etched brass sign below some faint discolouration on the rock showed....OO....this was determined to denote women's breasts.....would you believe! It was similar to etchings found thousands of miles away in The Kimberley that were more recent and were readily identified by the 'local indigenes'!!!

They bloody-well may have been playing 'noughts and crosses' for God's sake and were interrupted by a passing mob of Roos!!!

Then again, it could have been the first tentative strokes of drawing a woman's body.....!? What else would you start at but the boobs...especially if you were a 'Boob man'.....but SOOOOO one-dimensional...?

For God's sake....you're almost expected to stand in awe at these....these.....

I walked up 'The Island Stack' (quite a 'hairy' climb!) which gives you an awesome appreciation of Mother Nature's work....with a view of 'The Upper Canyon', 'The Lower Canyon' and the branching of the river around the 'island knoll'. The Lower Canyon walls are even more spectacular from here than on the walk of yesterday. The walls are sheer, smooth by comparison and vertical...about 100-200 metres across and by that deep....enormous! The view away to the north towards the Gulf shows spectacular variation especially 'looking through' one of the minor gorges (valley) of a lesser tributary.

The walk was exhausting...I'm sore all over...totally out of shape.....was only about 6-7 kays return but admittedly it involved a lot of climbing!

There were kayaks available for hire at the Rangers' building and I seriously thought about it...kayaking on the quiet waters up through the different gorges....I would have loved to have done it but my shoulder and arm were still 'playing up' and I still had little power or rotational movement.....no good when ya gotta paddle..... maybe next time if I ever come this way again.....anyhow, the Ranger was not too keen either as he said that not enough investigation had been carried out as yet after the 'Wet' to ensure that the various waterholes and Gorges were free from obstacles and crocs who may have/can have 'immigrated' into the Gorge system during the 'Wet'!

And were known to do so...!

Sitting under the awning after having had tea, cleared away and washed up about 6:00 pm with darkness falling rapidly, there is a sudden influx of tourists, nee 'tenters', frantically erecting tents before the darkness took over; kids complaining about being hungry; parents patience wearing thin after probably long miles on the road....why do people do that?.....getting to a destination with less than $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour of daylight remaining!

Watching them bought back happy memories though and made me 'home-sick' for those happy camping 'forays' to Stockton.....with blue and grey 'tarps'; tents positioned to create an undercover 'common area'; nights playing cards; getting pissed.....ah! The simple things of life with family and friends around.....this lot although together, did not create a 'corralled common area'! They

don't seem to have a clue what they ARE missing out on....

I think I'll head south to-morrow towards Mt. Isa but take the 'south track' through Riversleigh instead of 'backtracking' west to Gregory Downs.

The Riversleigh area is where they have found the largest collection of fossilised bones of prehistoric animals including Dinosaurs in Australia....but a check with the Rangers the next morning on the condition of the track put paid to that idea. The track for the most part was similar to my way into the NP with an occasional 'boggy' area over/through a creek crossing that should not give me any 'heart-attacks' but the 'crossing' at the Gregory River had suffered worse damage than the Causeway collapse that I had negotiated near Gregory Downs.

The river in flood had chewed out both banks with an almost vertical drop on either side of the river of at least 3-4 metres.....a definite no-go....! A long way to go just to backtrack and I doubted that I had the fuel reserves to even try it!

A tree branch was brushing against one of the tents just erected...so the bloke came out with a bush saw and chopped it off....so much for NP's and appreciation there of...and you guessed it.....they were all QLD'ers!

The next morning (Saturday) I got out of bed around 7:30 after a fitful night's sleep. The van was being rocked by gusty, strong SE winds. Even at the Camping Area surrounded by the hills the wind was strong often appearing to change directions as it must have swirled through the gorges.

I left the camping area around 9:30 AM and 'topped up' with petrol at Adel's Grove which is a small store obviously catering for 'those forgotten things'....it even had a Camping Area! Adel's charged exorbitant rates like \$1.80 for a can of Coke, \$1 per litre for petrol which was delivered by hand pump (supposedly one 'pump' was 1 litre of fuel which I doubted very much as I took 32 litres when my tank only holds 30!!! But so far out in the 'boon docks' what are you going to say.....I was running on petrol to ensure I kept a full tank of LPG as the distance from where I was to Cloncurry was 400-450 kays or to Julia Creek was 450-470 kays (the choice of destination would be based on 'road condition' reports) with the only chance to again 'top-up' being Gregory Downs on the way out which had no LPG.

The place is alive.....

Gregory Downs was having a 'canoe regatta' on the adjacent Gregory River...I don't know how as now that the 'wet' is over (supposedly), the river is reduced to a trickle and in the parts that I saw, was now just a system of interconnecting 'puddles'....full of Crocs too I bet! The race begins 30 kays downriver (?) and finishes near the Pub. Thousands of people. I fuelled up there around 11:30 am and the Pub was already rocking! And they even had one of those old fashion Boxing Troupes in a large tent across the road under the shade of some huge trees.

B & W RH had a Gymkhana on at the cattle yards diagonally opposite.....again thousands of people.....big, wide-brimmed hats, riding boots, dirty jeans and extremely tall guys....not one under 6'3".....the women were all 5'0" nothing and fat!.....I bet that tall beauty who served me as I headed towards Lawn Hill proves to be 'popular'!!!!

Da!....that's why they were serving petrol....they were here for the festivities.....and perhaps to make a little money on the side...wink, wink; nudge, nudge...Doh!

I drove for roughly 350 kays that day finally 'bushcamping' only about 80 kays north of Cloncurry....I was buggered as that mileage is well over my usual and 'comfortable' distance for a

day's drive. Saw the sign announcing a 'truck stop' 5 kays ahead so I just pulled in and stayed the night even though the place was packed....they must have been holding a Caravan Sale there for there was so many rigs.....too bad, I could talk for hours with the gathered throng about the dangers of buying an 'off-road' Roadstar....any takers? And the dirt comes for nothing.....but it added to the character and adventurous nature of the van beside all the other 'gleaming', clean rigs that would never see a cocky's comb of dirt plume out behind them....

They don't know what they're missing....as the gasps from their Owners indicated when I informed them of the condition of the road into Lawn Hill.....but as beautiful a spot as any of my favourites thus far.....that's Lawn Hill NP.

What little supplies I have left in the van should last til I pull into Mt. Isa where I should empty and re-fill the water tank plus get both gas bottles filled....the gas bottle I'm switched to for the van has lasted since God knows when and BBQ 'bottle' even longer....

pcb

(5 days in late April/early May 1999)

A direct transcript from my trip Journal with spelling, punctuation and grammar corrections (hopefully) undertaken on 27/5/2008

A CASE OF SELF-MUTILATION

I'd been in a self-induced state of inertia, a vegetative position, an enforced life-style re-arrangement or sacrifice for Queen and country depending on your point of view. I was stationery at the Low Level Caravan Park at Katherine NT in order to watch the 1999 ODI matches being played in England. Unfortunately, the matches began anywhere around 9:00 - 11:00 PM (NT time) and finished usually around 4 - 6:00 AM (NT time). This meant that on at least 2 - 3 days per week for the full 6 weeks that I was pitched at this Caravan Park my 'life' was in an upside-down routine.

This caused me not only to get to know the Park Office staff and Maintenance people but to be the butt of their various jokes, asides and practical jokes. Various 'fellow Travellers' that I befriended during this time also wondered aloud about my sanity showing no empathy especially as they were not great cricket fans....Oh!....What has become of the generation that sacrifices all for their Country.....? After we won the World Cup much to the amazement of many, I did my normal travelling practice and relocated about 30 kilometres up the road to Katherine Gorge.....or to satisfy the alcohol damaged pride of the 'Indigenous Ones', Nitmulik.....which I guess has a certain melodic trill to it.....

I did the normal 4 hour cruise on the 2nd day which one must do if in the area as it is an incredible area and the following day, the 'shorter' 12 kilometre "Loop Walk" which follows the edge of the

cliff-line and allows you to really appreciate the Gorge System from a different perspective and whets the appetite to perhaps 'do' the Helicopter ride which takes you over the entire system which is 13 Gorges, the last 6 or 7 inaccessible by boat....but \$125 for a helicopter ride that took you over the entire Gorge system and more.....a little steep for me when I was trying to save my meagre funds for helicopter rides further west that were enthusiastically recommended.

Anyhow.....I'd just spent close on 6 hours 'doing' this trek which took you up and down and up again around the Gorge rims and the various clefts and waterfall splash pools and had arrived back at the Van around 3:00 pm totally buggered.....knackered...no...worse than that....fucked!

I thought about what I'd have for tea before I had a shower and a bit of a nap and got out the great 'lump' of sausages from the freezer. I was endeavouring to prise apart some sausages so that I could thaw a couple and put the rest back in the freezer.

Don't ask me why I didn't have the sense to 'pack' 2 at a time for each meal size.....I have no idea.....I only started to do that after this little episode!!!

It is obvious that I am quick...!?

The knife slipped...straight through my finger...oodles of blood everywhere.....the "Chainsaw Massacre" occurred inside my van or that is what it looked like with blood spatters on the wall behind the sink, running down the face of the cupboards and 'pooling' on the floor.....!!! I tried to stem the flow of blood myself and administer First-Aid by putting a bandage around the effected finger.....to no avail.

I ducked my head out of the Van's door hoping that there would be some-one close by but would you believe, the sites closest to me were vacant for the first time since I had arrived here. I spied a group of Campers in the 'tent' area. By the time that I had grabbed my Medical Kit and walked over to their camp, my entire left hand and arm up to my elbow was awash with blood. As I approached two of the women almost fainted, a little girl began crying and one of the blokes began back-peddalling!!

I explained my predicament.....in my best parody of Nicholson in 'The Shining'

Another bloke, who had been in one of the tents as I explained the situation and asked them for help, used my bandages and Elastoplast to wrap up the finger. Once the blood appeared to have stopped and they had soaked my arm in Dettol (I don't know why) and cleaned up the excess blood the two women had become experts!! I thanked them and retreated to my Van to lay down on the bed with my arm stuck up into the air. I stayed that way for about an hour, feeling nauseated, but the bleeding didn't stop.

The two women later came over enquiring of my health and realised that the blood was still flowing. We re-did the bandages. Upon their insistence I walked down to the Reception/Information/Booking/Restaurant Building thinking that because it was quite a large building housing several different functions, there would be a Nurse or First-Aid Officer on hand.

Nothing.

They offered me more bandages as the new one that I now had on was saturated with blood. They suggested that I go into the Katherine Base Hospital some 35 kilometres away. I drove myself to the Hospital.

The Outpatients was packed with Abs.....the bashed, drunken, and football injured kids. An old wizen Ab was bought in by the Cops.....drunk, diabetic, going blind....he needed an operation that he was never likely to get.....not my words but the words of the 'Nursing Staff'.

I went straight to the head of the line...queue jumping the 2 dozen or so Abs lounging about on the chairs or lying prostrate on the floor. I would like to think that it was because the bandaging had again been saturated with blood which was now dripping down my arm to the elbow and not for any racially inspired reason.

Either way...I wasn't complaining.....but my small 'L' liberal beliefs were slightly assaulted!

It's easy to be so condescending as you are herded through the flap doors into the A and E area by a Emergency Nurse....white I may add!

Luckily the knife had bounced and sliced off the base of the fingernail otherwise it would have gone right through.....but it was still down to the bone. I was informed that it should have stitches inserted but due to my 'nomadic' life-style and more the fact that that because of the position of the slice down across the side of the knuckle and underneath, it would be extremely difficult to do.....they have no idea how I could have cut it at that angle as it looked as though the finger had actually 'rolled' as the knife cut through.....how the hell would I know because it happened so quickly and 'Slo-Mo' Replay is not available of the incident.....!

They laboriously applied about ½ dozen 'Butterfly Clips' on the cut and applied some 'yucky' stuff that stung like blazes and dressed it in enough bandaging to compete with Trafalgar's Column for its phallic symbolism....and it was still seeping!!!

They told me that I should have a Tetanus injection.....

I objected.....they called me a big woose.....I relayed the story about the last incident when I had to have blood samples taken.....I had fainted! About the defilement, abuse and penetration that females go through during their lives as against us 'normal' mere males and that is why most men are 'woosers' when it comes to any form of needles.....we are not used to this form of defilement and penetration.....and about the Medical Profession's covert testing for homosexuality by the reaction/non-reaction when the Patient (read male) is being abused with needles.....not that I'm homophobic.....what-ever.....it's just a theory of mine.....off-centre or not. I had the entire staff in an uproar.....it was supposedly the funniest thing that they all had heard in ages....but then again with the vast majority of Patients being drunken Abs who are not known for their light-hearted banter during these periods of inebriation and honestly lacked the command of the English language to indulge in the subtleties of humour to express similar flippant stories!!!! Then again, it could be just my 'sick' sense of humour on 'overdrive' trying to lessen the severity of the injury.....one needs a compassionate and caring "Carer" during these severe periods of bed rest and convalescence!!!!

Then they got back to the stern and humourless persons that lie sub-surface of all Medical Professionals....no activity.....definitely no wetting the finger.....(there goes my daily ritual of figuring out from which direction the wind is blowing from!).....try not to bend the finger too much which was nay on impossible in any case because of the amount of bandaging around it keeping it erect in the "One-finger Salute"!

They gave me a number of those stretchy water-proof medical gloves to which I parried, "Sorry...I'm not into latex.....have you something in the line if Kid or preferably silk?"

“Get outa here!” they all howled in unison.....

I drove back to camp after about a 1 ½ - 2 hour absence feeling nauseated with my muscles starting to cramp up from all the walking that I had done that day. I passed on my thanks to the “Nursing Campers”, cooked a hurried tea sharing the gas BBQ hotplate with 5 Germans only one of whom spoke English which ensured a ‘fractured’ explanation as to why my finger was in the constant ‘one-finger’ salute.....nothing against Germans though!

They thought the incident was hilarious!

What-ever.....

I was tucked up and fast asleep by about 8:30 pm.

pcb©

April 2009

(Copied directly from “My Trip Journal” as I transcribe the entire Journal onto ‘Disc’ and insert relevant photographs to ensure their survival...the quality of same is worth their keeping....HoHo!)

“HORSES FOR COURSES”

or

“WHO IS THAT MAN?”

I tootled into Turkey Creek around 11:00 am on a stinking hot, sticky morning. I checked out the ‘burg’ on foot which took about 5 minutes.....that gives you an indication of the size of the place....then had a rest, some Lunch and was wondering where I could camp as I was not impressed with the meagre camping area offered. I had wanted to stay in the area for around 2 days so that I could drive into the Bungle Bungles and hike around.....or.....more to my liking, tow the van in as I’d been advised that the southern ‘camp site’ near Cathedral Gorge had ample bush camping positions and would comfortably accommodate caravans.

How-ever, the report is that the road ‘in’ is an absolute nightmare....the 60 kilometre ‘in drive’ takes 2 – 3 hours.....it would be a long drive.....you need at least 2 days to allow for hiking to the various scenic ‘spots’.....it’s the end of the Tourist Season and the road has been ‘churned’ up something fierce with no chance of it being re-graded until after the imminent ‘Wet’.....

IT SEEMS THAT THIS IS BECOMING A COMMON, REPETITIVE PROBLEM FOR ME.....IN THESE AREAS ACCESSIBILITY CANNOT BE OBTAINED *DURING* THE WET, *STRAIGHT AFTER* THE WET OR *JUST BEFORE* THE WET.....

I didn't feel up to such a drive and I doubted that the truck and van were either.....and the alternative given is to leave the Van at the 'local' camping area or some people (very trusting people I might add....and possibly a little foolish) leave their Vans beside the track just off the highway....and then drive in by 4WD's. It's not that I don't trust my 'Bro's'.....I don't trust anybody when it comes to leaving my Rig beside the road unattended!

It's a pity.....but in those conditions it would be a long drive....a reduced walk missing more than I would see...I'm not up to it....besides.....it's too bloody hot!

I gave up on the idea....

I continued on to Halls Creek....another 160 kilometres....

Bloody hot....

BUT AGAIN BEAUTIFUL REMOTE MAJESTIC COUNTRY.....

Unfortunately Halls Creek was crawling with Abs. Apparently there were 5 separate "Communities" gathered here of around 700 Abs totally outnumbering the "Whitey" residents of the town by some 500!!!!

The occasion was the 'funeral' of a much loved 'Elder and Statesman' but the warning came from the Manager of the town Camping Area, the Roadhouse and the Bowls Club to be ready to leave at the first 'hint' of trouble.....the 'Elders' of each of the Communities had given assurance that there would be no problems and alcohol was banned from sale to the 'Bros' for the entire time that the 'tribes' were congregated in the area. (That in itself could be 'off-putting' for the local 'Wine, Spirits and Beer Purveyor' as record sales would have been assured!) There was a small number of Abs camped in the camping area that I was located in, but they had set up digs down near a back fence and each of the other 'Tribes' had set up camp well away from each other along the dry creek bed further out of town. There had been only a 'token' increase in police presence; the official stance being that any large and significant build-up of police in the area would be seen to be antagonistic!

I was told in rather hushed tones that police numbers had been significantly bolstered in both Broome and Kununurra and plans were in place for an immediate 'airlift' if need be.....but all this information wasn't sitting too well with me....I knew what I was like once I fell asleep....a bomb could go off under the Van and I wouldn't stir or hear a fucking thing!

But there was no need to worry....my anxiety may have gone into overload but there were no serious problems.....I think 2 Abs were stabbed....by members of their own 'clan'.....and there were several severe beatings requiring medical attention.....and again members of their own 'clan' were the culprits...but there was no major damage caused except to say that the dry creek bed (apparently) looked like a rubbish dump after the 'Tribes' left the area....which was some days after I had left the area in any case!

(This information was relayed to me about a week later as I sat fishing and chatting to a bloke on the Broome Town Jetty who turned out to be a 'Town Cop' from Turkey Creek. He'd been given a week off in lieu of overtime during the 'crisis' where he had been on Duty 24/7 for 4 days.....he was not a State Cop but more an Aboriginal Ranger and Community Affairs Officer.)

I didn't feel comfortable in sharing my 'digs' with so many 'Bros' so I went in search of the Camping Ground Manager. He was in the Bowls Clubhouse evicting some Abs from the

premises....bloody hell...not a good sign.....I thought that a good alternative to staying here was to head for the Wolfe Creek Meteorite Crater NP. His advice was that the road was absolute 'shit' having been 'churned up' during the Tourist Season and.....etc, etc, ect!!!! Big and continuous corrugations for 130 kilometres.....and it won't be graded until after the coming 'Wet' etc, etc, etc.....he recommended the Mary River Rest Area about an hour's drive further south of Halls Creek as the better alternative....

I hadn't as yet unhitched, put the stabiliser legs down or put the roof up, or connected to town water and power supply so I walked back to my rig and headed south out of 'Black Burg' where every building wall, fence or substantial shade tree had a group of lounging Abs sulking there. My slow progress to the town limits was followed by a mass of scowling blue-black faces and large white eyes and nary a bright white toothy smile amongst them.....

16 kilometres out of town was the T/O for the Wolfe Creek Meteorite Crater NP some 130 kilometres down the famous Tanami Track. I thought, "What the heck!" and I turned off the excellent bitumen of the highway onto a dirt track reminiscent of the horror that was the JimJim Falls Track in Kakadu!

The Manager at Halls Creek had not exaggerated.....

I got about 20 kilometres down the 'track' before commonsense and conservative thinking took hold!

I retraced my route back out to the highway, checked all fittings and fixtures in the Van and satisfied and pleased that nothing appeared to be amiss, turned south down the highway towards the Mary River Rest Area which turned out to be some 80 kilometres further down the highway.

It was mid-afternoon and stinking hot with the temperature it would seem about 43°C!

The Rest Area is some 1 – 2 kilometres off the highway via a reasonable but narrow dirt road that crossed via a concrete causeway over a wide dry riverbed...presumably the Mary River. The causeway appeared to have 'broken its back' in several spots sinking some-what at an alarming angle into the river bed but I got across OK. By the scraps on the concrete it was obvious that there were some rigs that had "bottomed out"....I'd say those that are towed by cars or monster Vans that have a fair overhang from the axle point to the rear of the Van.

The Rest Area itself was a raised 'pimple' of about 300 metres diameter and about 5-10 metres up from the river bed. The 'pimple' was surrounded in most part by the U-turn loop of the river course and a small dry bed gibber stone creek that connected the 'arms' of the U completing the envelopment....in the 'Wet' one could imagine the entire 'pimple' being surrounded by the flooded water course and one would be hesitant in negotiating over the causeway during that period.

The roadway completely circled the 'Pimple' and while there was no 'regulated/formed' camping positions, there were several presentable steel-sided BBQ pits of the type preferred it would seem by this State.....it would seem that each State and even State Region had their own preference to type and design of these pits. There was a 2-hole 'Bush Toot' of ample construction, several of those hardwood 'heavy as Hades' picnic trestle table and bench seat sets and large shade trees aplenty; more so towards the river bank than in the centre of the 'Loop', although the central area was not wanting in this regard.

I circled the area twice before selecting my 'digs' beside a BBQ pit which had a stack of fire-wood and tree limbs cut to a usable length beside it. The spot was situated right at the top of a steep grassy bank that dropped some 6 metres onto an expansive mudflat which was the dry river bed. Even

though it was at the end of the 'Dry' and the river was not running, there were several water-holes in the vast mudflat area mostly on the opposite side of the river. The whole area was alive with birds...Corellas, Cockatoos, Galahs, Cormorants, Darters, Egrets, various Finch and Honey-eater Species and of course the ubiquitous Crow. Cattle came and went from the waterholes or lounged on the far bank under the fringe of large River Gum.....it was the quintessential Australia scene.....and I loved it.....except for the heat, the flies and not a breathe of wind.....

I just had to try and capture it.....

I stomped over the mudflats quickly learning where not to go otherwise you ended up knee deep in squelchy, squirmy sludge that wanted permanent possession of your legs and anything attached. I lost my 'Jesus Sandals' to almost the first battle with the mud.....I made it about 1/3 of the way across wanting to get that "shot" that would typify the area....you know....large shade trees bent out over the dry river course; Ghost Gum and River Gum hugging and fringing the steep clayey banks; roots exposed always battling to keep a firm hold of 'Terra-firma' with the bank being undermined and collapsing around them; cattle lazing in the shade or lumbering up or down stock "ramps" tamped into the banks; sunrays beaming through the tree foliage highlighting/spot-lighting the heavy dust haze giving the bush background a yellowed, sepia appearance as though exaggerating the age of the scene; large bellicose, belligerent evil looking Brahman Bulls staring at me menacingly; other mobs gathered nonchalantly around the edges of the small waterholes; large expanses of mud stippled by cattle hooves.

Enormous flocks of Corellas wheeled and screeched their alarm at my presence.....a bloody large....huge in fact....Brahman Bull feigned an attack in my direction causing me to take stock of my position and with not much thought required forcing me to hurriedly retreat back to the safety of my 'digs'.

I didn't even think that at 75 kg if I had sunk to my knees in the quagmire then the bloody bull would not have a chance at something like 1000 kg on 'spindly' little hooves in this mud.....yep....I'm quick aren't I?....he at least seemed to know his limitations while I endeavoured to race back the way I came thinking that I was about to get gnawed to death by this rampaging beast....

I set up the tripod and camera on the opposite bank and tried to get that quintessential shot.....

I was impressed with the area and except for the heat, the humidity and the clouds of flies would be happy to extend my stay here for a number of days. (DOH!.....you would think by now with all my travels off the beaten track I would have twigged that where there is a mob of cattle...there will always be clouds of flies.....!!!)

Since I had set-up camp there had been a steady stream of vehicles with various assortments of Vans, Camper-trailers, etc inching their way across the Causeway and doing the loop around the Rest Area... a few used the Bush Toots.... None stayed.....

Could it be my unshaven countenance, my Jack Nicholson 'leer' or the fact that I was covered in mud from my hurried escape across the mudflat or the fact that my unshaven countenance was all but hidden behind a cloud of flies that deterred my fellow travellers from sharing this area with me for the night? I do not know but I was left alone until one of those Interstate Luxury Tourist buses towing a bulky tandem-axle trailer inched its way across the causeway. It hissed to a sibilant stop in the central area on flat ground some 100 metres from the 'Bush Loos'. The occupants disembarked in ordered confusion, all scurrying around like angry ants bent on defending their nest from invasion or damage. All had grey/white/greying hair and rounded stooped shoulders....and very

quickly a polite line had arranged itself at the Bush Loo. Meanwhile, the sides of the trailer had been lifted up and coffee, tea, bikkies and triangular sandwiches presumably with 'hundreds and thousands filling' were being handed out to those remaining obviously not suffering from prostate or bladder problems.

I had thought that those 'long haul' Interstate Tour Buses had a toot in the back.....but by the antics of its occupants, this one obviously didn't.

During all this activity I had remained seated watching the scene unfold. Perhaps some-one mentioned quietly about the unshaven, mud-caked, half-naked man leering at them from a distance for as one, they turned like a mob of inquisitive Roos to stare in my direction.....I waved and gave my best Nicholson leer....a few replied with timid waves while most turned away unsure how they would sink into the ground around them! As each person completed their ablutions and scurried to the trailer to wash their hands and take the proffered steaming cup of tea or coffee, others peeled off from their position at the trailer to dutifully stand patiently in line for their turn in the toot....I'm sure that not all had a chance to relieve themselves or enjoy that cup of coffee or sandwich before there was 4 blasts of the Bus' horn, the Trailer sides were closed, ½ cups of beverage were thrown to the tinder dry ground and styrene cups hurriedly flung into the 44 gallon drums that were placed liberally around the area. With another display of ordered confusion they seemed resigned in re-boarding the bus.

With another hiss of disengaging air brakes, the monster Bus and occupants slowly completed the 'Loop' and I had this vision as it passed my position of confused faces pressed up to the windows of the bus like little kids wishing that they too, could have a little time out if not to enjoy a moment of sublime motion, then to be able to say, "I think I'd like to tarry awhile at this spot". A wave by me, a flurry of nervous hands by them.....like caged children looking through frosted darkened windows not allowed out into the backyard because it was raining...noses pressed to the windows.....

I hadn't even finished my cuppa.....!!!!

They left....

In a cloud of dust and diesel fumes the bus again inched its way across the causeway....I don't know whether it would be turning north or south once it hit the highway but where-ever its destination for the night, it would be a safe bet that it wouldn't arrive there until around nightfall.....a meal, pitching their tents(?) then too late and too dark to be able to see their surrounding environment.....and looking forward to a repeat performance on the morrow(?)

Ah!...Yes! I can hear them relaying their adventures to folks back home..... "I did the tour around Australia in one of those Buses and the scenery was".....but horses for courses, for not every-one could/would or be able to travel (or is that crawl) in the manner that I am maintaining.....

pcb©

06/2009

(Copied and embellished from my Trip Journal (29/09/99) as I attempt to transcribe it and insert relevant photos for posterity)

“KIMBERLEY CAPERS”

I did over 120,000 kilometres doing my travels around Australia. If you stuck to the black strip better known as Highway No. 1 all the way around you will clock up around 18,000 kilometres!

Detouring was a manic hobby for me as I drove the kilometres. I hadn't realised how much this 'habit' was so ingrained especially when one may consider that I didn't complete the 'circumnavigation'. A fair assessment being that I only made it 2/3rd of the way around.....I didn't do any of the east coast of SA; the Victorian coastline or the south coast of NSW ; or for that matter any of Tasmania.....which whets the appetite to ensure that I complete the task before I die.....we'll see!

So it is a little unfair when one is asked, “What is your favourite part of Australia?”

In actual fact there is a lot of Australia that I haven't seen...not only the above-mentioned places but the vast expanse of the interior remains somewhat of a mystery to me! But to answer the question in another way, “Of the places that I travelled through during my meanderings, my favourites in no particular order would be:-

- Far north Queensland around Cooktown, Karumba on the south-east corner of the Gulf of Carpentaria and Lawn Hill NP in FNW Qld
- Kakadu especially if you are prepared to spend the time to explore this wonderful place
- North NT including the myriad springs and Litchfield NP
- The entire Kimberley Region
- Karijini NP which is something special
- Shark Bay and Kalbarri NP
- The entire SW corner of WA up to and including Esperance
- Perth
- The Eyre Peninsular and the entire Flinders Ranges complex in SA
- The New England area of NSW
- The coastal NP's of NSW

But it is The Kimberley that captured my heart and evoked the promise of another visit which would suit me fine....it is not that it is the most favoured spot or No. 1, it just evoked more awe, more excitement at the sheer size, majesty, expansiveness, beauty and mystery than any other area that I travelled through.....and maybe that's it....it conjured up more emotive responses within me than any other place. It didn't seem to matter what road or track I drove down, when I rounded a curve or crested a hill, the vista that lay before me usually took my breath away. The colours, the expansiveness, the twisted and contorted topography, the remoteness and the sheer beauty assaulted you.

And I was in the area at the most unfavourable and most uncomfortable time of the year, when it is at its hottest and most humid.....the build-up to the 'Wet' and its early 'beginnings'.

For those reason I should have hated the time that I did spend in the area.....

It would appear that it is not the optimum time of year to venture into this area as I was thwarted on a number of occasions as I endeavoured to turn down a particular track to visit a 'must-see' attraction. A visit to the Bungle Bungles, the Wolfe Creek Meteorite Crater NP, Mt. Augustus NP, Tunnel Creek NP and Windjana Gorge NP all via dirt tracks of differing distance off the main drag escaped me due to the fact that the 'access' tracks were churned up something terrible by the Tourist load that had just finished. I was told on numerous occasions that these tracks would not be re-graded/repaired until after the imminent 'Wet'.

The Official stance is that places mentioned above (which included the Gibb River Road) are not accessible BEFORE the 'wet', DURING the 'wet' (which is completely understandable) and AFTER the 'wet' (which is also completely understandable!) Which leaves a small 'window' of opportunity between June and July....thinking my cynically best.....I did start to negotiate most of these 'tracks' around late September/early October and it took me only a short distance before I had to concede that the Official 'Line' was yes indeedy, bloody correct!

I did how-ever, against the official 'warning gambit' manage to get into Tunnel Creek NP and Windjana Gorge NP.....in hindsight I perhaps should have listened to the 'local' advice.....

There are two names that are synonymous with The Kimberley area...The Durack family and the rebel black called Jandamara or better known as 'Pidgeon'. Every time you turned Around, one or the other name would be seen or mentioned.

Every Boab Tree that had had its 'centre' burnt out and used as some type of 'prison tree' had at some stage 'entertained' the presence of Jandamara or one of his 'rebels'.....

Anyhow, according to local advice, the back 'track' into the area that I had wanted to get into was impassable and to get into Windjana Gorge NP the advice was to travel down the highway to Derby, then up the 'good' 1st 130-odd kilometres of the Gibb River Road then back out the same way; a round trip of some 700 kilometres. The back impassable 'track' saved about 200 kilometres on this trip. I was fed up at being in these parts and not being able to get into those 'must-see' areas so against the advice of the Fitzroy Crossing Lodge Caravan Park Management, I set early one morning laden down with extra supplies of food and water. Informing the well-intentioned and friendly chap that I would be back. If I had not returned within two days perhaps a 'search party' should be organised. He shook his head at my folly and foolhardiness.

Perhaps I should have listened to local advice and curtailed the trip until I was camped at Derby and the T/O for the Gibb River Road was close by.....but what-ever.....

The back 'track' can best be described as a goat 'trail' with the truck in constant 4WD for the first 70 kilometres until you reached Tunnel Creek.

Several creek crossings were pretty 'hairy' not for the water but the depth of the slime! The 1st crossing should have given me some indication of what I may expect for the remainder of the leg. This 'crossing' was only about 7 kilometres off the highway. I went down to the running boards in thick slimy mud at the second crossing only extricating the rig by separating the truck and van and hand-winchning both of them out. The truck came out comparatively easy in 4WD Low 'Throttle speed' using the hand-winch at the same time. The Van's A-frame wanted to continually dig in until

I started to use the small 200 X 50 timber 'blocks' that I used as the stabiliser 'sole' plates in sandy soils as a kind of ramp for the 'jockey wheel'. I positioned one of my spare wheels to hold up the snap-strap so that the jockey wheel wouldn't continually 'dig in'! I had to unhitch on two other occasions where the 'trail' violently switchbacked. The track at these junctions was fine 'talc-like' whitish sand/soil which caused me some problems. The only positive aspect of the 'extraction' exercise at the slimy creek crossing was that I had left Fitzroy Crossing about 6:30 am and while it took some 45 minutes for the extraction exercise it still was only about 8:00 am with the sun and temperature only just starting on their long climbs for the day.

The countryside around this area is absolutely fantastic with incredible rock formations looking as though Mother Nature had wrung her hands or thrown them in the air along with whole sedimentary rock plates.....

After about the fifth creek crossing the track improved with the two tyre rut track giving way to a narrow dirt track of small but continuous corrugations with only the occasional 'switchback' and 'sandy stretch' until I reached Tunnel Creek.

I arrived at the small, roughly formed empty car park in the late morning with the temperature around 40°C and the atmosphere heavy with humidity. I slung the backpack over my shoulder, grab the truck torch and my camera gear and strolled toward the entrance point to the 'tunnel' which was well sign-posted. A group of tourists appeared from within the gloom of the tunnel entrance. I swung my head around in the direction of the Car Park only to have it confirmed that the area was empty of vehicles.....except mine.....I waved nervously and asked would they stand at the entrance while I took a 'shot' for perspective. I didn't have a clue who they were but if their images didn't 'turn out' in the shot then I was in strife.....then I chastised myself....they couldn't be ghosts as they had cameras and torches.....by their language and accents I'd say German or Dutch! I thanked them for their co-operation and started walking towards the 'entrance gloom' as they headed for the car park. I hid behind a boulder and watched their progress as they headed off down the road.....I saw neither hide nor hair of them again.....

The 'tunnel' is some 750 metres long and narrows from a large opening down to a varying width of 6 – 20 metres wide. It is usually in the band of 4 – 8 metres high but according to the 'disappearing tourists' it does get down to about 2 metres high in one spot where the water is around 900 mm deep, usually only around knee deep in numerous pools...but it is still and cold; and thank God, the air was also a bit nippy, considerably cooler than the outside temperature.

According to the 'Group', they had made it through the entire length but as I progressed my torch became dimmer and dimmer and eventually 'gave out' just past the point where the outside sunlight failed to penetrate. I was standing in knee deep cold water; it was now pitch dark with up/down, left/right and backwards/fore-wards having little meaning. There was a loud 'dripping' sound and the air movement through the tunnel created an eerie constant noise.....I wouldn't/couldn't go any further....to be honest I 'lost' it and got the hell out of there quick smart...really only having to walk about 6 metres before the outside sunlight created a 'dimness' that you could 'see' by.....I reckoned that I may have gone no more than 50 -70 metres into the 'tunnel' depths.....but I sure as hell could feel the weight of rock above me.....moving.....

I sat in the 'entry area' of the tunnel where it was still cool and had some lunch.....feeling a little cowardly and not impressed with my performance!

Windjana Gorge is around 50 kilometres from Tunnel Creek and approximately ½ way between the two is the ruins of the Gilimilura Police Station. This is where Jandamara commenced his illustrious career as a 'tracker' for the local Constabulary that ended with him being the most wanted person in

northern Australia and being killed where he had initially started his association with the 'White Man'

I couldn't figure out why the building had been positioned where it was as there didn't seem to be a constant and/or guaranteed supply of water. At this late stage into the 'Dry', there was no sign of surface water anywhere within close proximity. I walked over to the low escarpment line and followed its base for some time without finding any sign of water. In hindsight this was possibly stupid because of the heat which had continued to increase but more importantly, because I was wearing my Yakka 'cheeky tight' shorts and my 'Jesus Sandals'; completely inappropriate attire in obvious snake country.....

I continued on to Windjana Gorge. The track improved as I got closer to the gorge area.

I turned off the main track into the Parking Area for Windjana Gorge. The Car Park was flat, completely devoid of grass or any large shade trees, about equivalent in area to a football field. It was divided in two by a line of low timber bollards as straight as a 'die'. According to the signs, one side was for short-term day 'trippers' while the other half was for 'Campers'. An impressive concrete block, concrete slab roofed Toilet Block was located tight up to the small escarpment cliff-line with several water tanks 'buddha sitting' on either end of the structure. The area because of its size seemed to indicate a large number of tourists visited the Gorge....but not to-day, mine was the only vehicle or 'rig' in sight.

The red dirt, stone strewn surface of both areas seemed to radiate heat adding to the high temperatures which I reckon had to be about 43°C.

I parked hard up against a line of scrawny trees that designated the edge of the "Camping Area" almost opposite the Amenities Block. The trees did not throw much of a shade area; their limbs drooping as though they were suffering from heat exhaustion. I thought that they may give some shade if I happened to be here long enough for the descending sun to throw some shade from their skeletal shapes.

You trek down a clearly sign-posted walking trail that has all the indications of being well trodden for some 100 metres before you arrive at the commencement of the gorge. Even though it is the end of the 'Dry' there is a considerable amount of water still in the 'river' within the Gorge. Where the Gorge begins and is at its narrowest, there is a natural damming effect by a sand-bar and some metres from this bar appearing to be surrounded by shallow water is a large boulder which is named "Jandamara's Rock" supposedly because this was where he sat scouring the countryside for any 'Whiteman's posse' after him....

Sitting rather jauntily on top was an Aboriginal Gentleman dressed in burgundy long sleeved western style shirt, a pair of black jeans with what looked like Crocodile skin Riding Boots. A large black hat with a brim almost as wide as his ample shoulders sat low on his head. The shirt and jeans were pressed to perfection. There was no indication of how he had climbed onto the boulder and his boots and bottoms of his jeans did not seem to be wet.....and again for the second time to-day, there was no sign of a vehicle anywhere!

He had not moved or in any way acknowledged my presence.....I stopped walking, waved at him and said 'G'day'.

At that he raised his arm and flicked the brim of his hat with his thumb and finger.....I pointed my chin at the water where several Crocs were floating, otherwise they were perfectly still.

“Freshies?” I enquired of him.

“Yes.” He replied in an educated, well modulated softly sounding voice. “There’ll be rain to-night as they are restless.” Gazing at the crocs below him. They didn’t look restless to me as they still hadn’t moved!

“It’s hot enough for a swim.....would they leave me alone?”

“I wouldn’t.....they may!” was his warning.

“Can I take a shot of you?” I asked.

“I’d prefer not.....I may loose my soul.” And by the look on his face he wasn’t joking!

The gorge is supposedly 3.5 kilometres long and I reckon I made the 3 kilometre ‘mark’.

It was as though the Gorge radiated heat from its sides and with no breeze at all, the heat seemed to be ‘captured’ within the Gorge. I had never experienced a heat that was so oppressive, so ‘heavy’ that just breathing was a chore and it may have been this that tossed sound judgement out the window as I HAD to go for a swim to cool off! I endeavoured to pick a spot where I could get close to the water’s edge without walking across too much of the mudflat to do so. How-ever I immediately sunk to my crutch in the mire and I ended up crawling and half rolling to the water’s edge. It wasn’t until I got right there that I thought perhaps that flinging myself into the depths of the ‘pool’ may not be the most wisest thing that I could do; but then again floundering around in knee deep mud at the water’s edge then also struck me as a bit fool-hardy. Visions of death rolls filled my mind’s eye. I took my T-shirt and shorts off and dunked them in the cool water. My ‘Jesus Sandals’ were lost to the tenacity of the clinging mud in the process of getting close to the water and by the time that I managed to get back to the bank, solid ground and the walking trail I was all but covered in this stinking, sticky ‘goo’.....and without any shoes!

The walking trail was mainly fine talc dirty sand and obviously retained the heat of the sun as walking bare-footed was impossible.....and I was some 3 kilometres from the car park!!!!

I scooped up as much mud as I could, tore my T-shirt in half, tied the sleeve-ends in a knot, split a water bottle in half and packed each half with mud, put my foot into it and then slipped each foot into the T-shirt sleeve tying it up above each ankle with the cord that I removed from my shorts. What remained of my T-shirt I stuck on my head and kept it in place with my baseball cap with the T-shirt tail trailing down over my shoulders....! When-ever I could on my return ‘trek’ I would scoop cool water up with my cap and splash it over my body causing the mud that covered a lot of my torso, legs and arms to smear and run.

I had started out with 4 bottles of fresh water and I thanked God that I had not used it to wash myself off as I needed to take constant gulps of water because of the heat. I had only drunk 1 bottle on my trek in but had ‘downed’ the other 3 on the way out such was the heat.....!

I must have looked a ‘right’ sight with most of my body having mud smudges to some degree with both legs ‘caked’ with it up to my crutch and wearing these rugged ‘shoes’.

It turned out to be a slow walk back to the Car Park what with having to re-pack my ‘shoes’ with fresh mud several times or having to re-tie the T-shirt sleeves around my ankles.....

The Ab gentleman was not seated on the ‘throne’ to see my ragged and muddied return....and I

wondered again at the number of apparitions that I had seen to-day.....I also wondered what he would have thought of my appearance; possibly shaking his head in amazement at the sanity of the 'Whiteys'!

As I entered the Car Park area totally stuffed and dehydrated, one of those monster Interstate Tour Buses was spewing forth a line of Oriental Tourists all with hand fans going ten to the dozen, who were flabbergasted at my apparition....I think the same reaction would be expected from just about any nationality on Earth.....but they quickly regained their composure and resorted to their most favoured 'sport'.....aiming and clicking their cameras. I can't even imagine how they would explain my appearance and the subject of their photographic expertise to those back 'home' who may see the shot!

After endless 'bows', endless smiles and waving of arms they walked in a polite file towards the Gorge entrance...more than likely to hang around the "Rock" while the genteelly speaking Ab took on the persona of one of his 'Bros' and explained in a mixture of Abspeak and 'pigeon English' the brave exploits of the only Ab on the entire Australian continent who gave the 'Whiteys' a run for their money before being shot to death and his body fed unceremoniously to the Crocs.

I tossed my gear into the back of the truck, peeled off the 'temporary' footwear and from the Van extracted another pair of thongs.....another pair of recommended walking 'boots' especially in country like this.....I filled up several drums with water from the Van tank, filled the 'Bush Shower container' with water and laid it on the truck bonnet to warm up, placed a small blue tarp on the ground at the Van A-frame on which I sat with a leg in a drum of water and commenced the laborious task of cleaning myself while explaining to the Bus Driver and his 'relief' the reason for my rather frightening appearance.

They assured me that they would convey my story to the Tour Guide who would inform all passengers in 'Orientspeak' of my adventures! Apparently my emergence had caused some concern amongst the jabbering throng fearful of their safety and the reason for my sudden and frightening appearance swung from me being "a part of some 'Pantomime' being stage by the 'Locals'" to a "Madman about to run amok and slay all and sundry"!!!!

It took some 5 drums of water to clean myself off with each drum full of dirty water being poured around the line of scrawny trees to relieve their obvious heat distress; the water appearing to be sucked greedily into the parched soil immediately that it hit the ground!

I transferred the blue tarp to the rear of the Van and mounted the 'Bush Shower' container onto the bracket that I had welded at the top of the Bike Rack 'pole'. Although it had only been exposed on the truck bonnet for some 15 minutes it was surprising how warm it had become. I gave myself a final dousing of clean cool water from a bucket. I had kept my 'Speedos' on during this entire process only shedding them for the final dousing! A towel wrapped firmly around my torso I retrieved another pair of 'Speedos' from the van as the Relief Driver seemed to take an unhealthy interest in my nakedness!!!!

The Bus Driver gave me a cup of coffee as I dried off in the sun....I shouted the 'smokes'....

Driving out of the Car park and heading towards the intersection with the Gibb River Road some 20 kilometres away I noticed bulbous dark grey storm clouds building to the north-west. Coming in from the ocean. I mused to myself that the old Aboriginal couldn't be right, could he? Predicting the weather by the antics of the Crocodiles around him.....surely not!

He more than likely heard it forecast on the radio this morning.....something that I had obviously

missed.....antics of the Crocs? Nah! Not likely!

But then.....you never know.....

It was still above 40°C with the humidity overpowering.

It did look like that it may rain later in the evening and I shook my head in wonderment at the genteel Ab being able to predict the rain based on the antics of the Freshies around him in the water!

Instead of turning left and heading south to Derby I turned right to drive further up the 'Gibb' Road because the Bus Driver had mentioned several gorges and 'magic' camping spots in the King Leopold Conservation Park that was only about an hour's drive up the 'Gibb'.....the turn-offs were well sign-posted according to him.

The 'track' wasn't that bad; about 1½ times wider than a single lane road but with ample areas to pull over if confronted by oncoming traffic which by the way, there wasn't any; relatively straight with few curves or bends; deep in fine talc dust in most parts with small corrugations and where there was an obvious creek crossing it was mostly gibber stone that meant that you were reduced to a crawl.....but over-all....acceptable.....and again the landscape was.....enormous, majestic, expansive, beautiful.....and the cloud build-up gave it a more beautiful, ominous appearance and the light had that sepia 'feel' about it.....

I know that I can be a little slow at times and show no common sense (as my Father offered time and time again) but **IT DID** take me some time to add 2+2.....! I thought to myself eventually that if it did indeed rain, then this track with its kilometres of fine bull-dust would be turned into an absolute impassable quagmire. By then I'd done some 70 – 80 kilometres and I came upon a turn-off clearly marked as the Leonard River Gorge and Camping Area. I was about to swing in when a Toyota Troopie came out of the track and stopped. A dark as night Ab alighted and sauntered over to me. He was a squat man with a neck as thick as his head, shoulders a mile wide and a hat brim to suit which he caressed with his finger in greeting. He had a smile that could only be combated by the wearing of Polaroid sunglasses and he enquired in a friendly manner as to my intended destination. He advised me that he was closing up a lot of the Camping/Sight-seeing areas and advising people to head for the towns as it was going to be an early start to the 'Wet' and if it rained to-night (which he said it would), I would most definitely be marooned here for at least 4 months with no way out!

"Brudda....ya bedda head fa Derby if'n ya doan wanna be here t' nex year.....cum back den t' see da sights...."

I reversed down the 'turn-off' while the Ranger assisted with his arm waving directions to help and swung back the way I had come. He was swinging a heavy chain across the road to stop further intrepid or stupid travellers from trespassing. With a wave and a broad grin he fare-welled me on my way.

He eventually caught up to me as I was a little slower than he and with a toot he turned off at the Windjana Gorge turn-off while I continued on down the 'Gibb Road' towards Derby.

(I saw him later that night at the Fitzroy Crossing Petrol Stop/Roadhouse.....he had taken the short cut; the back track that I had come in on and he displayed his disbelief when I told him of my adventure in going that way this morning with the Van attached.....)

The thunder and lightning was increasing and the wind had picked up.

I stopped at the beginning of the tar about 50 kilometres north out of Derby to transfer the last 20 litres into the petrol tank when it started to plop large drops of rain that started intermittently then built to a continuous roar of water falling from the sky and continued to do so all the way to Derby with the clouds being split asunder with thunder and lightning.

I filled up with LPG and Petrol in Derby in heavy rain, thunder and lightning with the bloke at the Roadhouse continually shaking his head at the weather and muttering that he had lived here for 30 years and this was the first time that the 'Wet' had started on the last day of September for God Sake!....It was going to be one hell of a 'Wet'.....according to his bones!

As I left Derby heading the 125 kilometres to Fitzroy Crossing it was dark, the lightning was enormous more like strobe lighting with the rain alternating from a heavy wind blown spray to large 'blobs' of water bombing the roof of the truck. I almost ran down a steer and a number of Roos, killed some type of bird in the middle of the road and caught two wild cats in my driving lights....it was extremely dark with the lightning flashes brilliant.....it was a drive that I did not want to repeat in my life time and several times I was tempted to stop at designated roadside rest areas but was unsure whether I would make the tar again once I had pulled to the dirt....I kept on going....it wasn't steamy hot but it was not chilly either!

About halfway between Derby and Fitzroy Crossing the rain just stopped! Not a drop....not a prostatic dribble as though some-one had turned off the emergency stop cock! (Pun intended). Steam seemed to drift up from the bitumen still hot from the day's sunrays. A stream of white steam marked the route of the road and reminded me of one of those Zombie movies where the fog lay thick on the ground.....it was that eerie!

Then I hit a wall of water as the rain began again.

From memory I may have passed two on-coming Roadtrains if that but traffic was decidedly light all the same.....

I pulled into the Fitzroy Crossing Truck Stop and paid for tea having a chat with the bloke behind the counter and the Ab Ranger who had told me to skedaddle earlier that afternoon....it was a slow night at the Road House.

Sated, I drove back to the Lodge Caravan Park not bothering to stop at the Office, parked in my site of yesterday and dived into the van not bothering about unhitching or hooking up power or water or raising the roof of the van. I dried myself off and collapsed onto the bed absolutely buggered and fell asleep.....with the rain hammering and the thunder shaking the ground....

It was no later than 8:30 pm!

pcb©
(30/09/99)

Written 06/2009

(As I was transcribing my Trip Journal onto the Computer I was surprised how the Journal entries could jog my memory on the finer details of a particular adventure or stupid incident depending on your attitude.....but the trip would not mean half if it wasn't for these stupid incidences....there was a surprising number of them to record which says a lot about your 'author's sanity.....and common sense!!!!????Perhaps?)

“THE COMPANY TOWN”

There were so many places during my travels that I knew were ‘must see’ destinations but failed to go there for a fair few reasons. This was most apparent in the area from Karumba, up over the ‘Top’, down through The Kimberley and places inland from there and down the West coast of Westralia. As I said for various reasons and I guess to be honest with myself, an excuse or two...but mostly it was because of the ‘distance’ involved, the state of the road or weather conditions.

My paranoia ran wild and I had this mild anxiety coursing through my body because of my location and the fact that the imminent Cyclone season was bearing down on me. I had many a conversation with ‘chronic Grey Gypsies’ who had adopted the “Life on the Road” and their horrendous stories of being trapped in some isolated location with a cyclone the strength of Tracy that had devastated Darwin bearing down on them!

And so it was as I tootled down through The Kimberley, Derby and Broome being quietly advised by “people in the know” that it was going to be an early commencement of the ‘Wet’ and I should not be anywhere around this area if I did not want to be stranded here for anywhere between 2 – 5 months dependent on the severity of the coming Cyclone season. The previous 98/99 Cyclone season had caused much damage to Exmouth and Onslow which were almost wiped off the map, Geraldton, Port Hedland and Wyndham and major flooding through the Kimberley and Pilbara regions.

So with these ominous predictions buzzing in my brain I tootled in a southerly direction down the far north coast of Westralia, trying to see as much as was prudent but not tarrying for too long at any one spot.

Port Hedland.....a BHP Town.....spread around the stockpile heaps of “graded” iron ore; the stretch and seemingly ordered chaos of intersecting railway lines and sidings; the glistening white hulk of the salt pan beds.

Both the Nissan, Chrysler and Toyota dealerships, which seemed to be owned by the one ‘chap’, displaying new 4WD models, all covering under a red dust shroud of iron ore; every house stained with the same colour; roof, walls and even fences! The main shopping precinct ‘stretch’ uneven, unplanned, typical far Westralian architectural mish-mash of badly maintained buildings unpretentious and unselfish in stature, style and finish....supposedly all preparing to batten down for the coming cyclone season.

The Harbour impressive; 4 huge ore carriers end to end loading continuously with 2 huge hulks looming on the horizon awaiting patiently for their turns. All things though dwarfed by the BHP presence with an ambience that seemed to hang heavy in the air....of industry, of size, of magnitude, of magnificent scale; all ‘bodies’ working for the “Firm” or their presence blessed and approved by the “Firm” so that they could ‘remain’ unmolested in this town.

I’m glad that I ‘pitched’ at the Cooke Point Caravan Park and not at the South Hedland CP as was energetically recommended to me by...(?)...some-one! The Cooke Point CP sits on what looks like a man-made ‘spit’ above a surrounding area of mudflats/mangroves and would you believe a meandering ‘blue water’ creek. The scenery just that....but there is a distant view of the ‘orderly’ storage ‘heaps’ of iron ore and the new \$280M Steel Briquette Mill that shimmers in the far distance....but you are within walking distance of the sea. I could imagine that Sandflies, Midges and March flies could be a problem but with a constant strong SW wind, they appear to have been blown further inland.....

But the South Hedland Caravan Park....gee...miles from no-where....except South Hedland....which is the newer “satellite” residential area possibly planned/located another 15 kilometres inland from the coastal Port area to reduce the damage/flooding during the cyclone season perhaps or positioned so that the area would not be subject to the constant drizzle of iron ore dust that permeated through everything.....and failing dismally!? The whole area obviously designed by a Town Planner/Architect who ‘did his apprenticeship’ in the ACT with NCDC! It appears to be a series of half ‘cloverleaf-like’ “drives” intersecting at ridiculous angles, narrow streets, a ‘sameness’ in residential architectural design.....I’m not impressed.....but ...gee....it may look very impressive, neatly laid out and ‘tidy’ from a plane.....even the houses have that institutionalised sameness similar to the ‘old’ street by streetscape of War Service Homes of the western suburbs of Sydney. But these houses look “bunkered down”, cowering from the heat and anticipated strong cyclonic winds, all red stained to some degree, almost neglected in their disregard for regular maintenance....but then it’s a “Company Town”!

The local “Clean Up” for the coming Cyclone season starts to-day with the fore-cast predicting an early start to the season! This Caravan Park is the first in my many kilometres of travel that handed me an “Info-sheet” on evacuation/relocation procedures in the event of an imminent cyclone. They are not taking any chances and there is no joking or light-heartedness on the subject as the town, along with Onslow and Exmouth were almost wiped out last season.....Oh! Shit.....Exmouth is something like another 1000 kilometres south of here and by my standards that’s another week’s travel ‘at haste’ for me which would put me squarely in the expected early commencement period.....

BHP certainly controls the town even to the extent that the majority of Councillors on the City Council either work for or have some major contractual or investment ties to BHP. It seems that Tourists and Tourism in general sit low in their order of priorities to the extent that there is no way you can view the sweep and industry of the harbour; view the massive loading/unloading facilities on either side of the harbour; the extensive/expansive Sea Salt Farm Pans and the loading/unloading and stock-piling area; the unloading and stock-piling facilities for the enormously long Ore Trains that come in from the various open cut Iron Ore Mines further inland and you cannot get within a bull’s roar of the new Briquette monster Mill.

I’d been doing my normal “busy-body” practise of trolling through the residential streets and the commercial area of the town and had noticed the huge “Mill” in the distance further out of town.

This Mill which cost in the order of \$280M to construct had only recently been commissioned and was out of bounds to all but a ‘chosen’ few as the hushed advice was that there had been several severe accidents during its construction and with its recent commissioning there had been unexplained explosions, gas escapes, flying molten metal and industrial disputes and where several employees had been either killed or severely injured.

Apparently the bugs had yet to be ‘ironed out’ of the manufacturing process!

I was informed again in hushed tones, almost reverentially, that the Mill was utilising leading edge scientific manufacturing procedures and it was the first of its kind in the world.

As though that should explain the ‘bad rumours’ on the place!

After several wrong turns, detours and back-tracking, I drove down this road that seemed to lead straight to the Mill and which was parallel to a roofed conveyor belt that ran straight as a dye out from said Mill. This conveyor belt is over 15 kilometres long (I think as there wasn’t any

information on it) leading from the Mill towards the Harbour where it forks, one line going under the harbour to the loading facilities on that side while the other services the opposite 'land-side' loading facilities.

As I tootled along towards the massive complex looming in the distance I noticed a pedestrian 'overpass bridge' that spanned over the conveyor belt giving access to the desolate landscape beyond that appeared to be just massive mudflats sparsely dotted with low-lying scrub. Who for God Sake knew the reason.....gee....I can be quick! There was an open access gate to this bridge and thinking that the 'Overpass' may offer an opportunity to take some 'perspective' photographs of the distant Mill, I did a U-turn and parked beside the gate. The boundary fence that ran beside the road and appeared to isolate the conveyor belt and its adjacent maintenance dirt road from the public thoroughfare was no more than 1200 mm high and was not by any means a 'security fence'. There were no "Keep Out" or "No Trespassing" signs attached to the gate or the length of fence that I had noticed. I had time to climb the steps, set the tripod up on the "Bridge" and take a number of photographs before, in a cloud of dust a Security 4WD with lights flashing, a whippy aerial with an orange flag flapping stopped at the foot of the access steps to the 'bridge' disappearing for a moment in its own 'cocky-comb' of dust.

Smoky Bear, Wyatt Earp or who-ever alighted from the 4WD and emerged from the dust cloud. I half expected a musical crescendo to accompany his materialisation from the dust cloud as though his appearance was a contrived 'Hollywood' photographic illusion. He stood legs apart, fingers hitched in his belt at the base of the steps as though to climb the 12 or so treads may challenge his stamina. He had that surly air of authority, a wide brimmed hat that completely shaded his face. One way dark glasses. No gun or holster but a heavy black baton and what looked like a 2-way radio hung on either hip from his belt. His AK 47 and Uzi probably cradled against the rear Cab window of the Ute. A young bloke, obvious signs of obsessive 'pumping iron', a blond bushy mo fringing a stern cut of a mouth. He had the 'air', the mien of a bully. He waved his arm in the air in a circular motion with a dipped pointing of his finger to his boots to end the action.

'What...yer got dirty boots and ya want me to comment on them?' I thought to myself. 'This guy's bin watching too many Smokey and the Bear Movies and he thinks he's one of those dim-witted, megalomaniac southern state Sheriffs.....what.....ya want me to lick 'em clean Sheriff?....or was that a fancy come hither gesture?'

I reckoned that I'd taken enough photos of the Mill in any case but I deliberately took my time in packing up my gear just to be a 'stupid' smart arse!

I came to attention in front of him at the base of the steps.

'Whatcha doin' up there boy?' I imagined would be his opening gambit....

"Sorry..." I said. "What!....you're not allowed up there?.....there's no sign on the gate or the fence that I could see.....the gate was open.....I thought it was OK....I just wanted some shots of the Mill and the conveyor giving the shot perspective and depth...."

I trailed off.

"How ya goin'?" He enquired in a pleasant voice. "Nah....that gate's sposed to be closed and locked.....it's for maintenance staff....that conveyor...." With a point of his chin in the 'belt's' general direction, "It's travelling at over 30 kph....some silly idiot'd put his hand or arm in there an' he'd loose it straight away!"

The low rumbling hum that seemed to reverberate and shake the ground was the only indication that

the conveyor belt was running at maximum speed. I supposed that they would be more concerned about some drunken Ab craving his ancestral bleak country trespassing onto the area and accidentally or perhaps childishly thinking through his alcohol sodden brain that it would be a grouse ride! I was going to voice these thoughts but then thought better of it thinking that I could be accused of not appreciating the seriousness of the situation.....but I seem to do that a lot!

Instead I complained that a person couldn't get anywhere to take decent shots of the Port or the unloading/loading facilities, the railway system or those unloading facilities, or the Salt Farm activities and now the new Mill!

He nodded his head in agreement informing me that his In-Laws had come up from Perth for the recent school holidays and uttered similar sentiments. He worked for "The Firm" yet still couldn't get any special consideration or dispensation to take them around or at least get them closer to any of these areas.

"Sorry...." He said. "That's just the way it is...."

Just goes to show how misleading initial perceptions can be.....

His original demeanour did not reflect on his friendly almost apologetic manner now that the ground rules had been established.

A nice bloke actually.

We stood there chatting for some time leaning against his 4WD, the gun cradle no-where to be seen. But we agreed that BHP were missing out not only on a good PR exercise but a money earner of some proportion by not providing better viewing platforms, more information and guided tours through their various enterprises. It is realised that the Port and all the ancillary activities are 24/7 and involve inherent dangerous climates but with a bit of thought these elements could be minimised to those interested parties who were willing to pay to participate in guided tours. From what I had seen during my wanderings, there was a huge 'market' in this 'floating population' who would be enthusiastic to engage in the 'Ooohs and Aaarhs' of interested 'sticky beaks'. He was in thorough agreement with all that I said and saw the opportunity in mentioning it as a means of partaking in a career change perhaps, he said jokingly.

He wasn't enthused about the long days and even longer nights of heart rendering boredom that his security responsibilities entailed. The highlight locking horns with the local Ab community or members of it who in a drunken oblivious state trespassed onto Company land.

He was also very interested in my recommendations of 'must see' places and announced that he and his missus were deep seated gypsies at heart but his 3 young kids meant that digs had to be maintained; but once the 'nest' was vacant they were both 'gone' doing what I was in the process of doing!

We said fare-well and safe life to one another and again he was lost in a cocky-comb of dust as he retraced his route back towards the 'Mill'. I stowed my camera and other gear into the truck and walked away towards the massive structure on the horizon as he had advised me that I could not drive any closer towards the Mill than what I was.....but I was looking for surveillance cameras as his appearance piqued my paranoia of 'Big Brother' watching.

I could not for the life of me see anything at all like that. Perhaps there was some sought of powerful camera closer to the Mill that kept an eye on the dead straight roofed conveyor line.

On more than one occasion I had been quite sternly ordered from an area that I should not have been on/near although there were no signs to indicate that your presence was forbidden.....to the contrary in fact, as though the lack of “Warning” and “Keep Out” signs warranted the large security personnel numbers that seemed to lurk around every corner and materialise from every shadow.

The Company a benevolent monster that permeated the very fabric of the town.....an “X-File” episode!

I noticed another ‘cocky-comb’ of dust that I suspected was heading towards me so I hopped back into my truck and retraced my tracks towards town and the caravan park feeling slightly frustrated that so many ‘points of interest’ were barred from viewing....

The Company Town with those on the inside....and those on the outside!

pcb© 07/2009 *Transcribed from my Trip Journal entry of 19/10/99*

I FELT LIKE A LASCIVIOUS PEEPING TOM

I went for a drive along the coast “road” towards the Cape Range National Park some 50 kilometres south of the tip of the North West Cape. I’d been told that there were plenty of good fishing spots there.....nothing specific but just a general wave of the hand....I got the impression that the ‘locals’ were never going to divulge the ‘hot spots’ to an “Eastern State Tourist” no less. What I was further told was that there were plenty of beautiful camping spots within the Cape Range NP mostly right on the beach.....all bush camping.....and on the right tide it was possible to tow the van all the way south passed Ningaloo to Caves Beach with some beach dune ‘climbing’ required.....but you had to be careful as the entire length was a ‘designated Turtle Hatchery’ and beach driving was ‘frowned upon’ but not illegal at certain spots.....you had to be an expert to ‘pick’ those spots.....

I drove south along the coast road into the NP....yes indeedy.....there are some beautiful and secluded bush camping areas along the entire section of coastline both in and out of the National Park...alas all of them around designated Turtle Rookeries. At the entrance gate/Visitors Centre into the National Park a Ranger expressed doubts as to camping at this time of year and advised that a cyclonic depression could cause torrential rains and an enforced stay within the area with the wind gusts possibly toppling the Van over....they came onto the coast without much warning.....and what he was describing was not even a “categorised” Cyclone!!!

“At best get out of the area or at worse, stay within a Van Park where they can tie ya van down”.....

I had this feeling in the back of my head that even though he may be giving me sensible advice, there was a more basic reason...he was trying to discourage any camping during the mating/nesting/hatching period of the numerous rookeries within the area. Fair enough I guess...but

if the area was that sensitive during this time, why don't they just close off the Park to all forms of Tourists/Campers...after all it must be a Government declared National Park...or would this be considered too radical in the minds of Westralian 'Rednecks'?

I was walking along the beach length at the Frantz T/O not far from Exmouth when I noticed something floating in the surf about 100 – 150 metres out.....I rushed back to the truck to grab binnies and my Tele-photo lens for the camera and my tripod....

It was a pair of Turtles copulating, cavorting and carrying on....

Then I noticed that there was about 6 pair in a 500 metre stretch of the beach just off-shore...

All in the same throes of passion.....

Into it.....!!!!

I sat and watched for about 1 – 1 ½ hours....The act of copulation seemed to last hours with the occasional bob of the head above the water surface for air. The female seemed to have the worst of it because of the added 'deadweight' of the male on her back. She was swimming, floating and surfacing for air for both of them and as time went on you could see her struggling more and more in getting to the surface and taking that gulp of air! They all eventually seemed to float, swim or be guided by wind or tide onto the beach at the water's edge both firmly still stuck together; both looking utterly exhausted. Laying there 'doggy-fashion', the female's flippers spread out either side of her body giving the appearance of utter and exhausted submission. To lift her flippers or head seemed an absolute chore.....the male still firmly weighted on her back seemed to be asleep.....

Nothing changes.....Oh!.....for a cigarette and a can of Coke!!!

Even after the male eventually slid noiselessly from her back and without a backward glance of a 'salute' or a promise to still love her in the morning, he slipped under the waves and was gone. The female still languished for some time at the water's edge, exhausted still or so it seemed before she too, ponderously and clumsily rotated her body and moved toward the shore-break wondering perhaps to herself what all the fuss was about!

As the sun set there were the blackened outlines of about 20 -30 pairs doing their bit to minimise the chance of extinction of the species right along the beach at the water's edge and while all this mayhem and exertion was going on you could see, where the extremely small rippled shore-break pummelled the sand, countless black shapes under the water patrolling up and down the beach length. When two shapes met, and passed muster, they would as a pair, head to the deeper water to begin the ritual.....I wondered whether any of the males came back to the shoreline for 'seconds'....

Walking along the beach just on dusk you could see the 'dune-shaped' funnelled bowl of a turtle eggs' nest and when you really inspected the area there appeared to be thousands of them along the 50 kilometres or so of beach front....high up in the dune system well above the high tide line. Some had the tell-tale tracks leading from the sea and return made presumably the night before. What surprised me was that the flipper 'marks' were so close to the body 'scrap mark' and it gave me the impression of great exertion...of utter exhaustion not only of reaching the desired 'spot', then digging out the hole, laying the umpteen dozen eggs, backfilling the hole and returning to the sea.....I understand that the entire sequence takes most of the night.....

There was a "coming and going" set of tracks up the side of a steep dune which had an incline of

around 45° with the 'dimple' of the nest positioned precariously on the incline as though she had run out of 'puff', realised that she was not going to make the crest and resigned the fate of the eggs to their precarious position. But it was some feat as I had trouble negotiating the length of the slope.....

It was magical, beautiful.....awe-inspiring!

The next morning I rigged up 2 of the rods...

After the cricket finished at 3:00 pm (local/here time) I sped up the road to the Frantz T/O.

The Sou-westerly was whipping straight along the beach and you got sandblasted after no more the 2 minutes.

I'd been told that this stretch of beach was producing and the trick was to find a section of sand going out into the water with no coral or reefs nearby.....I can understand why.....but realistically in this brisk wind no matter where you cast, the wind just bought the line hard onto a shoulder of coral. On this beach (apparently....here cometh another 'eastern sucker' who you can tell anything to!) the prevalent fish caught are 5 – 10 kilogram Snapper Mackerel, Trevally and an occasional Queenfish that take the bait and run....straight out over/into coral and/or reef sections. Even the Reef Sharks do it!

During the 5 ½ hours that I stood at the water's edge I lost 6 steel trace rigs including sinkers.....it wasn't the traces breaking so much as the actual line abrading over the reefs. While I didn't land anything, the initial hit and 'whizzz' and power of the 'pay-out' got the adrenalin rushing....but I blame the loss and lack of fish landed on the fact that my mind wasn't really on the job at hand.... The Green Turtles are incredible and are out in force.....

There was a reef section going out to sea at right angles to the shore-break further down the beach. The turtles would swim over this reef and peel off turning either to the north or south to swim close and parallel to the shore right on the little shore-break ripple. At first I thought that they were just marauding horny males but as I sat and looked at the rhythm of the 'caper' I wasn't so sure. If they bumped into a male/female coupling there'd be a brief "getting to know you" two step, a "circling of friends" where the female (she was always the larger of the two) seemed to do a lot of flipper smashing on the surface of the water before the 'group' would head out into deeper water. Usually that was about 100 – 200 metres off shore but some of them possibly allowing ardour to overcome them, didn't make it half that far! In fact, 2 copulating pairs were only some 30 metres out from where I stood....

There seemed to be a fair amount of activity in the initial contact. If the male didn't make an immediate and successful mount but instead kept on slipping off, the contingent of circling ever-present horny males would endeavour to be successful which often resulted in a flurry of flippers, boiling white water and writhing bodies. At times, there appeared to be 3 – 4 males all endeavouring to be 'The One' which only resulted in the female flapping her flippers wildly.....one can only surmise that it was an action of frustration; or anger at the impotency of the mere male; or impatience at the dilly-dallying around or perhaps sheer terror at being slowly drowned by the incompetent fervour of the horny pack. If a coupling appeared to be successful, the hapless marauding males return to the shore-line and re-commence their patrol up and down the beach front for-ever optimistic that at some stage their seed will help in the survival of the species.

The copulating 'couple' would be 'at it' for up to 1 – 1 ½ hours where often several re-mounts were required.

They were everywhere and as the sun set the number on continuous 'beach patrol' increased with 10 – 12 turtles passing my seated position at the water's edge about every 15 minutes or so.

As the sun dipped below the horizon the entire water's edge for the length of the beach of around 3 kilometres was littered with exhausted bodies presumably all females....the males having congregated at the local pub for a drink, a smoke and boastful reminiscences of their passion and stamina!

The females would languish at the water's edge; several for about 1 ½ hours before slipping back into the water. Some on doing so were accosted and propositioned again by the marauding and optimistic pack of males.....

At about 7:30 pm it was getting hard to see as it was a dark night but you could see the sheen of water on the darker backs of the shells as the females left the water and laboriously, slowly made their way up the beach. I wanted to follow one or two but I got a couple of sharp bites, 2 hook-ups and the mad 'fizz' run out and then I had the most horrible "Christmas tree" that I've ever had with the 'Eggbeater'. I lost my temper tramping up the beach to use the truck's headlights to try and free the tangle, eventually just cutting the lot free.....I was exhausted!

About 5 ½ hours of fishing.....and nothing to show for it except an empty bait bucket, the loss of all my steel trace lines, a couple of heart-pumping hits and runs and my observations on the mating habits of the Green Turtle....which was the incredible memory....I sulked back to the van thankful though that I at no stage of my life was I expected to remain fervent for several hours.....let the turtles do it.....I bloody well couldn't!

pcb©

August 2009

Transcribed (but not verbatim) from the 4th and 5th November 1999 entries in my Trip Journal

“YOU CAN BET ON IT”

Again it's the same old song.....

You start packing up and preparing for the road and people seem to materialise from the ether almost wanting to natter about anything and everything.....they may have been pitched beside you for days and shown a minimal air of friendliness....or you could have been 'best friends' for the last couple of days and had a formal 'fare-well, a last supper even' with them the night before but like bees to a honey-pot they will congregate around your rig the minute that there is any sign of hitching for the road.

It didn't matter if it was in a Caravan Park where one was 'wall to wall' with other 'happy campers' as was the case at the Mataranka Springs Homestead Van Park; or in some remote bush camping spot where there was just my rig and one other as in Port Smith; or in some remote National Park where you didn't even know that there were 2 lovely German 'backpackers' tenting beside their

Ford Falcon station wagon some 100 metres away through the trees until they both sauntered through the bush as you broke camp asking for some coffee or sugar to replenish their supplies; or in a large town Council Caravan Park where the temporary inhabitants seemed to congregate as a large daily impromptu gathering at the evening meal time in the communal Kitchen/BBQ area and all was laughter, smiles and good spirits as there would still be that informal gathering of 'Natterers' 'Good-wishers' and 'Farewellers' around your rig as you tried to get everything ship-shape and prepared for the road.....

In fact the reverse situation arose as I prepared to set-up camp at Coral Bay in WA. It was well out of the tourist season with both caravan parks in this hamlet less than 20% occupied and a constant howling seasonal sou-westerly gale putting a damper on all 'normal' activity. I had just begun to reverse the 'rig' into its allotted site when the bloke on the next site over strolled over for a chat. It took around 2 hours to set-up camp when the exercise is usually well and truly completed within 15 minutes! He had a Philippine wife who couldn't speak English and obviously the guy was starved for conversation....it didn't bode well for the days ahead and I had visions of having to kick him out of the van in the wee hours of the morning.....but he was a nice enough bloke; a retired Builder from Coffs Harbour who seemed to know when the 'Welcome Mat' was about to be pulled from under him.....on most occasions at least!

I would imagine it to be almost like when 'crews' were ready to set sail in their small sailing vessels in by-gone times for the great unknown on that great adventure of exploration out of sight of land. Every-one gathered at the dock to say their last 'good-byes' knowing that these brave men would never be seen again as they were about to suffer that awful fate of falling off the edge of the world!

To me that is what it seems like.....no.....I do not classify myself as some intrepid explorer who will save mankind by finding the long lost southern land.....or that bloody dingo with baby clothes caught between its teeth even now....still!.....but just a meandering happy soul who just seems to attract.....

So it was and always will be that as soon as the sound of 'cranking' breaks the stillness of the morning air...as long as it is not at the crack of dawn when most of these people are still fast asleep....some-one will wander over to ask the required questions and as soon as one person does it, it seems to attract 'a following'.....the sight reminding me of one of those 'low-grade' Zombie Movies where as one grizzly, severely disfigured and mutilated body emerges from the ground so do countless others as though they had been waiting for another to be at the vanguard!

So it was the usual....

They knew that I had spent hours fishing the day previously.....they had been peering through slightly parted curtains of their vans leering at the scantily covered lithe young Backpacker lasses cavorting around their 3-man tent and they had vaguely remembered that I had driven out of the van park with all the fishing paraphernalia strapped to the top of my truck.....They would voice their frustrations at the lack of fish being caught complaining about seeing these large Queenies, Mackerel, Salmon and Snapper strike into massive clouds of baitfish below them in the crystal clear water as they fished from the deep-water jetty at Learmonth (south of Exmouth) but not hooking a bloody thing.....!!!

Or the weather.....

Or the state of the nation.....

Almost any subject seemingly just to delay my imminent departure....and invariably doing so on

some occasions by several hours.....I can't help it.....I too, like a chat.....but.....

They would want to know my destination north or south, whether it had been recommended, the state of the roads and if they were heading in the direction from whence I had come, what were the recommended points of interest.....I would rave about some place not to be missed but as soon as I mentioned 'dirt roads and/or bush camping' it was surprising the number of 'happy campers' who threw their noses in the air and 'pooh-poohed' any destination that didn't have a 4 ***** rating and power and water hook-up. What amazed me too was the complete lack of any fore-planning or knowledge of the areas into which some people would be heading....and any thought of visiting the local Tourist i Centre to gain some guidance/advice and even something as basic as which Van Park was recommended appeared alien to a lot of the elderly 'travellers'!

I had been 'shoo-ed' from the Kimberley Region and warned as far south as Port Hedland and Onslow that I should consider heading for more southerly climes poste haste to escape the fast approaching 'Wet'....all indications were that it was going to be an early 'season' as well as generally being predicted to be a 'good one'. Two elderly couples both from Victoria who apparently had 'joined up together' while crossing the Nullarbor and been together ever since were a prime example. They appeared not to know that they were heading into the beginning of the 'Wet' and its inherent dangers the further north they kept going.....and if it was indeed to be an early and good 'Wet', they could very well be stranded 'where-ever' for some time....and that would be the more preferred outcome rather than being blown apart by a savage cyclone. I can remember the chaos weather patterns that I had been subjected to as I drove north through Queensland in 1997 and again in early 1999 and even though I had not been subject to Cyclonic conditions but more by cyclonic rain depressions, the constant rain, wind and wide spread flooding had meant huge detours or 'hunkering down' until the weather had passed.

That was Queensland.....but the west coast of WA was vastly different with remoteness, distance and the fact that there was only one way in/one way out with no possible detours available that would enable you to skirt around a flooded area that should have indicated something.....surely????

When this was explained to these two elderly gentlemen they just looked at me as though I had suddenly appeared from another planet.....and this little conversation had caused me to be delayed by several hours.....I could have, if they had shown the inclination to converse the day before, relayed this information then.....not bloody now.....as I was preparing to depart.....

Where do these people come from and what have they done during their lives...??????

In my entire travels I can confidently state that not once did I wander over to a 'packing-up' fellow Caravanner to disrupt and/or delay their departure but would usually bade them a 'safe journey' as they drove from their van site and this would be to those that I had become familiar and friendly with. To those that had shown no inclination to be friendly even towards their close neighbours (and this was a surprising number of 'campers') if I was out lounging under the awning as they prepared for departure, I would at least wave my best wishes as they left their 'digs'.

I guess it took me some time to recognise this at times infuriating habit and I could never understand a persons' need to totally ignore a fellow traveller for the entire time of their stay but on their eminent departure want to become their 'newest best friend'!

And I still do not understand it.....

But you could bet your house on it.....

Three out of four times as you prepared the van, made everything ship-shape ready for the road, your departure would be delayed for at least ½ an hour and at several locations with Kalgoorlie in WA and Esk in Qld springing to mind, the hour of departure was delayed by at least 2 hours!!!! Sure....I did not want to appear rude and cut the conversation short and can remember enjoying the conversations with persons that I had had little to do with during my brief stay at both locations but at other times it involved a conversation with people that I had enjoyed and spent some time with as at Undarra Lava Tubes in Qld.

What-ever.....

As soon as you start winding up the Van stabilizer legs....they will appear like zombies looming from a heavy fog bank.....

You can bet on it!

pcb©

Written 08/2009

The memories were constantly being tweaked with mostly amusing incidences being recalled as I slowly and laboriously transcribed my experiences that I had religiously recorded in my daily Trip Journal during my travels from 1997 – 2001

As per this little 'account' it was condensed, embellished and intermeshed from many a similar incident that occurred during those fantastic and warmly remembered travels.

THE DEATH OF A TRAVELLING COMPANION

I don't rightly remember when they 'hitched up' with me only that this curious ménage de trio seemed to enjoy my company and humorous conversation.....they must have as they travelled the width of Australia with me.

It could have been during my extended stay in Townsville; or perhaps my enforced isolation in Cairns when floodwaters and a constant deluge from seeming waves of cyclonic depressions and rain storms prevented me from proceeding further for some weeks.

But their presence indicated a certain cunning on their part well above the intelligence levels that they had been previously noted for!

The external Van light was habitually left on for some time into the night and with my habit of getting thoroughly engrossed in some book til the early hours not being an uncommon occurrence, at least one light within the van was burning at all hours.....thus clouds of insects were attracted to these lights and were constantly clambering and crawling over the insect mesh panels of the Van's

pop-top vinyl sides. The construction of the roof panel afforded 'hidey-holes' and plenty of safe havens from many marauding endemic 'hunters' of game and it was there that I first noticed their presence.....

.....two pale sandy coloured small Geckos and a little green Tree Frog that feasted on the abundant insect life that thronged about those lights!

I hoped that the two geckos weren't a copulating couple as I had nightmares of being up to my armpits in little geckos! I understand that Geckos and for that matter little green Tree Frogs have distinctive 'calls' but the trill of their pleasure, enthusiasm and feasting fell on deaf ears and I was never given the opportunity to get 'up close and personal' to appreciate the uttered thrill of enjoyment.

It is interesting to note that up until the late 1990's there were about 12 different 'identified' Gecko species Australia wide with localised differentiation colourings and markings put down purely to their adaptation to the local environment in which they were located. But DNA research carried out by some Scientist with a Commonwealth grant and little else to do discovered that this assumption was incorrect and he proved conclusively that there were close to 30 different Gecko species Australia wide with another two being identified in 2008.....I do not know what this has to do with my subject matter but it is interesting the information one can find on the Internet!

Of use or otherwise!

I think that it was in the savannah land of central North Queensland that I noticed that the little green Tree frog was no longer with me and I am uncertain of its fate. It could have just fallen off the Van as I tootled the back 'Development Roads'; been a tasty morsel for a game Hunter willing to venture that close to a traveller's 'house' or....not a pretty thought....been in the wrong place at the wrong time when I collapsed the 'Pop-Top' roof.....a death too horrible to contemplate. But I took solace in the knowledge that I still had my two little Geckos with me now accustomed to the nightly feasting especially in this 'back-block' country where I would 'bush camp' for a night or two off the road to be bombarded by clouds of insects attracted to the only light for seemingly hundreds of kilometres about....!

Because of the exciting times that I was having.....or more accurately the first signs of Alzheimer's having set in.....their presence or lack there-of completely escaped my notice except the fact that the duo had been reduced to a lonely one sometime during my wonderful 3 week stay in Kakadu!

By the time that I was heading for the WA border even his lone presence or lack there-of escaped my notice!

How cruel and shallow of me!!!!

Some 10 months after leaving Cairns in North Queensland I was pitched at the coastal hamlet of Denham which is on the seaward side of the Peron Peninsular that is more famous for the 'Swimming with the Dolphins' myth at Monkey Mia at Shark Bay. It is about 2/3 down the WA coastline almost directly opposite on the other side of the continent from Cairns! About 4,000kilometres as the crow flies!

I took a call from my Accountant who informed me that they had not received my paperwork for the tax year ending June 1999. I was sure that I had sent it off via Registered Post whilst I was 'stuck' in Darwin some months previously and a check of my Travelling Diary confirmed this.

To be on the safe side I rummaged around under the bed looking for all the paperwork when who should pop his head up but my little travelling companion..... the little Gecko! He was a lot darker than the original sandy colour of the Tropics but he still looked plump and healthy.....I wondered what he had been living on for all these months.....dead flies from my constant spraying of the van trying to keep their numbers down; ants that maybe 'nesting' under there; my flakes of dead skin; just cardboard; or while I never considered myself a messy eater maybe enough 'tit-bits' were discarded to ensure his/her/its survival.....?

Who knows.....?!

But my heart soared at his re-emergence and he too appeared to be happy at my happiness as I swear he rushed toward me and actually raised his front arm (?), leg (?) paw.....in salutation!

Before I rang the Accountant back the following day to advise him of my findings and let him know of my euphoria in re-discovering my little mate I lifted up the bed and there he was on top of the TV 'transportation compartment lid'.....squashed!.....his guts hanging out....one squashed little Gecko.....dead.....and not even nailed to the perch.....his only crime was to emerge from his hidey-hole when I lifted the bed more than likely to identify himself and thank me profusely for feeding him for the last umpteen months.....and for this offered hand of friendship I repay the poor little bugger by taking his life.....the cross-member of the bottom of the bed 'platform' configures with the position of his final resting place so that as I laid down on the bed he was in the wrong location at the wrong time.....dead.....my travelling companion.....dead!

Why get morbid over a dead Gecko...?

And one that had even changed his colour.....so you would be unsure whether he had also changed his philosophical outlook on life and was actually plotting my downfall....how would I know....I don't speak or understand Far North Queensland Gecko-speak even if I could bloody well hear it!!

Even though he could now have been my enemy I said a little prayer, shed a little tear and with heavy heart popped him into the garbage bin....I know.....he deserved more after surviving for so long on my flaky stale dead skin....but.....I've never made a coffin before and wondered whether they were made with dovetail joints at every corner.....and besides the local Catholic Priest refused to hold a 'high' Funeral Service for him....

I intended to go for a fish out on the breakwall later that afternoon.....I wondered whether 'fresh' gecko flesh would be good for bait.....

.....rummage.....rummage.....this time through the rubbish bin trying to retrieve the little fellow.....

How shallow can one person get?????

pcb©

01/2010

(More or less copied during the immense task of transcribing my Daily Trip Journal that up to this point has taken 12 months to accomplish....and I am still around Geraldton on the WA coastline! It is taking me longer to achieve this transcription than it did to do the travelling!)

“THE PLACES YOU GO; THE PEOPLE YOU MEET!”

I pitched at the Beachcomber Coconut Village Caravan Park at South Mission Beach for about a week with either heavy rain or low threatening cloud being the normal weather pattern that curtailed many an exciting foray of discovery!

But I guess that I should be used to this.....I've been either rained in/rained out; flooded in/flooded out or have had to detour for many hundreds of kilometres in an endeavour to get away from the constant 'stream' of tropical cyclones or those that have degraded into severe rain depressions since I was around the far north coast of NSW.

South Mission Beach had been highly recommended to me by.....(?).....obviously a Queenslander whose view of what is perfect has been 'blighted' by that State's own Tourist bullshit brainwashing.....Boat Harbour north of Cronulla is far better by comparison to most Queensland 'shore-line' destinations that have been recommended to me by.....Queenslanders!

One must ask why a mouthful of a name for a medium sized Caravan Park right on a narrow strip of dirty sand is required except to say that with the normal Inferiority Complex displayed by all that are Queenslanders, such a name is necessary to make sure that every 'base' is covered so to speak.....this constant weather pattern could have something to do with my biting attitude to all things Queensland to be sure.....

What-ever.....

I wasn't about to let sheets of vertical water force me into a vegetative state though!

I left the Van at this pleasurable little Van Park and back-tracked to Townsville and every little port of call on the coast between there and here, into the hinterland and several spots north of my present digs, all looking rather water-logged which, when you think about it, still maybe more preferable than hot days with the humidity going beyond 120%!

There was no point in 'visiting' the reef or going on any Fish Charter cruise as every Cruise Operator was well and truly secured in Port such was the wind, the rain, the swell and chop and the lack of transparency in the water in which to view the coral beds.....perhaps another time if things do not improve within the next month or two.....

So I did the next best thing.....I paid to fish in a Barra Farm north of South Mission Beach.....

There were 3 pools in the Farm plus an 'indoor Nursery' area which held about 15 X 1000 litre tanks for tiddlers and immature fish....if the tiddlers and immature fish were transferred into the outdoor ponds too early, the fish already in these ponds would eat the smaller fish and/or they could be taken by Eagles, Kites or Hawks which were a big problem. The outdoor ponds were about 1 ½ times the size of a standard building block (which is around 60 X 20 metres) or around 2000 square metres and each pond held around 3000 Barra!

They extracted around 250 – 300 kgs of Barra a week out of the 3 ponds in total.

The Barra once they were released into these ponds from the 'Indoor Fingerling/Hatchery ponds grew about 5 centimetres a week.

I spent almost 2 hours there which was twice the time that I had paid for.

In that time I hooked and released 4 small Barra which were only about 300 – 400 mm long though to their credit, put up a better fight than the Barra that I caught up in the Coburg Peninsular which were a lot bigger from what I remember.

The Owner informed me that “Farm” Barra are more solid and stronger than their ‘wild’ counterparts.

I was the only ‘Angler’ there and for about the first ½ an hour I had no ‘hook-ups’ but plenty of ‘strikes’. The Owner was disappointed for me.....so he took the rod to demonstrate several ‘hints’ that he thought may help. He got a bloody hook-up immediately the lure landed in the water....a bloody huge Barra about 900 mm long that skipped, bounced and somersaulted across the surface of the water.

He sheepishly said that was the first time that had happened.....

Yeah.....Yeah!!!

I hooked onto several larger fish that ‘spat’ the lure prior to me landing them.

He said that we would not leave this damn pool without me getting a “photographic specimen” even if we had to stay there all bloody night.

Eventually after close on 2 hours had transpired, I hooked-up a reasonable ‘specimen’ of around 450 - 500 mm long but I don’t know how the shot will turn out as he knew neither to focus or fire.....!

What an absolute ‘buzz’.....they gave me along with every other Angler, a Certificate proving success....

I returned to the van a very happy, contented but sore shouldered boy!

It’s raining so bloody hard that I can’t do anything.....but then if the “Hired Help” can use a 2-stroke “Edge-Trimmer” and a “Ride-on” Mower to keep the grounds and surrounds ‘picture perfect’ in this weather, I can take the 50-odd kilometre drive NW from here up to Paronella Park for a squiz.

Tully is shrouded in low cloud and rain fronts.

It holds the distinction of being the ‘Highest Rainfall’ Town in Australia.....and you can tell by the width and depth of every gutter in town....they are a veritable ‘canals’ that would make Cooks Canal envious!!!!

It’s about 25 kilometres due west of Mission Beach as the crow flies. Directly in front of it and between it and the coast is a low mountain, more like a high hillock of some 150 – 200 metres high. Directly behind the town is a headland-type of escarpment about 300 – 500 metres high with the ridgeline or escarpment line spreading both to the NW and the SW from this ‘knob’ like headland with these steep-sided valleys on either side. The warm NE and/or SE winds are diverted around the hillock and squeezed at the same time to be funnelled up either one or other of these valleys depending what the wind direction is. Either wind direction usually brings rain in these parts but because of the physical attributes and the position of the town to them, the town cops a belting.....

Well.....that's my guesstimation.....

Heading towards Paronella Park took me up the NE facing valley; narrow, torturous roads; many crossings of streams with a 'mish-mash' of sugar cane farms thinning to banana, paw-paw and pineapple farms as you go further up the valley with little 'deliverancesque' Hamlets....

I arrived at Paronella Park, had a look-see and booked in advance into the 'quaint' little Caravan Park for to-morrow night.

Something that I've never done before and should never do again....

But this place is something to experience.....to mull over what drives us all.....this is the 'folly'.....or the dream.....depending on your outlook.....of one man. His drive, his stubbornness, his industry.....

For a short while it was somewhere where the 'Rich and Famous' went to be seen but with relentless and uncompromising habit, successions of "Wets" put paid to its continued success with the maintenance and upkeep quickly outpacing the new construction work that when it had been completed would have rivalled perhaps the Palaces of Europe.....or so it seems to the Architect/Builder of this place.....with the tropical vegetation slowly overtaking the area.

It has been used on numerous occasions by the film industry for its magnificence tropical backgrounds and decaying buildings.....

I was in awe at the industry and dream of one man.....against all odds!

I was confronted by a 'funny' sight upon my return to the exuberantly named Beachcomber Coconut Village Caravan Park at South Mission Beach.....

A bloke and his missus in a LWB Nissan Patrol Diesel towing a 24'-0" tandem axle caravan came in late afternoon and chose a van site directly opposite me.

It took him 1 hour 15 minutes to reverse the van into a position beside the concrete slab that satisfied him and his missus....apparently they wanted to be able to step from their van onto the concrete.....that isn't that difficult to do unless you're measuring the gap between the van and the edge of the concrete in millimetres and the van must be absolutely parallel to and centred in length to the length of the slab.....

I've got to give kudos where kudos are due....neither he nor his missus lost their tempers.....un-fucking-believable!!!!

I sat under the Van awning having a beer and updating my Trip Journal watching this whole scene unfold before me.....not really sure whether it was occurring or not.....until I saw several other like-minded souls further along enjoying the delights as they too sat out under their awnings watching the proceedings.....also shaking and scratching their heads!

After this exorbitant amount of time and after they had hooked up to water, power and sullage.....and after hosing down and chamoising off his 'mechanical steed' even though it was raining a fine mist, he and his missus strolled to the Amenities Block, both with their heads held high as though they were proud of achieving their 'settlement' in quick time.....

The bloke emerged some time before his missus and even though they were only yards from their

Van, he waited patiently in the light drizzle for his missus as though they needed to traverse dangerous territory before making the safety and security of their 'battlements'!

Both walked briskly to their Van with a look of horror on their faces.

I guess they were unimpressed with the Amenities.....I mean they were not by any fair shake '5 star' but I've stayed in Van Parks where they were decidedly worse....and for a much greater tariff, I might add!

The roll-out awning of their van was about the same size as the concrete slab that they were addressing but because of the continual drizzle there were several shallow 'puddles' of water on the slab in front of the van. He tried several times to sweep these away before giving up and walking over to the Van Park Office.....I guess to complain!

The next morning I had a light breakfast and started to make things ship-shape.

The bloke pitched diagonally from me came over with his wife (both Pommies) for a natter; another bloke from Atherton (just uppa road brudda) several sites away also came down for a chat.

None of these people have said 'BOO' to me prior to this but as soon as time is precious and the clanging sounds of imminent departure rend the air they come around like moths to a flame.....we sat nattering for about 1 ½ hours.

The Poms are from Perth heading for Cairns....a nice couple.....the bloke with his missus close by from Atherton who were doing little trips to run in their rig ready for the 'Big One' sometime next year....a nice couple too!

I had the van hooked and ready to go....talking....talking....while the bloke opposite who had taken for-ever last night to 'pitch' his van sat in his truck waiting for me to go....so he could hook up himself !!!!!

I cannot figure how I was holding him up but he seemed to think so and said so in no uncertain terms.....

He was also leaving and demanded that I hurry up and go so that he could go....I informed him that once I hooked up ready to go, I would be having a shower and besides, even with my 'rig' hitched up, it did not encroach onto the access roadway or in any way hinder his preparations for hitching up or departing. I informed him that he would need to swing away from me to drive in the opposite direction as the access roadway was a 'one-way' street....and that way was away from me.....

He got really 'huffy' especially when the bloke from Perth and the bloke from Atherton put in their 'two bobs worth'. Both of them agreeing with me! It was as if this elderly guy was one of those rare beasts that causes the hackles to stand on end of every one else around.....an instant dislikeable person if one must describe him so.....

But he persisted, claiming if he was being forced to go in a direction that he didn't want to go even if it was the 'right' direction, then so should I!

He was being a little obstructionist, argumentative and belligerent.....

By this time the Park Owner had come out and in a voice that didn't offer a chance to argue with, he told the guy in no uncertain terms which way HE thought the guy should go; rig and all....and

trying to explain to this guy that the reason why I was being 'forced' to go against the 'traffic' so to speak was because a tree was stopping me from manoeuvring in that direction.....unless the spot that he was squatting on was vacant so that I had the space to swing around through.....something the guy seemed not to accept....him being a brilliant manoeuvrer of Caravans!!!!

The Park Owner (a bloody nice bloke actually) then told us that while I had been talking to 'Perth' and 'Atherton' and unbeknown to us, he had cleaned down the concrete pad on which this bloke's van was sitting beside as the bloke had bitterly complained that the concrete was slippery and that the double concrete slab allowed the pooling of water and that there was too much water lying about (it bloody well poured last night) and that the kids in the flip-flop (mini-campervan) next to him had made too much noise...also last night when he had come in he wanted to 'pitch' on the slab next to

the one that he eventually ended up on but had been told that that site was booked and the people were coming later that afternoon/night....which in fact they did turn up.....while this whinging bloke had spent over an hour 'siting' up.

The other happy camper-people had 'pitched' within the accepted 20 minute time-frame for setting up and were well and truly finished long before the 'whinger' had even sited his van!!!!

The whinger in protest proclaimed that the Park Owner had no right to take reservations for particular sites and it should be a policy of "First in best dressed".....additionally he had complained bitterly on the condition and even the design and the construction of the Amenities Block along with the badly constructed concrete slabs that allowed this very dangerous 'pooling effect' of surface water with nothing so it would seem being capable of placating this arse-hole.

Upon the guy complaining this morning to the Park's Owner again of the water lying around, the Owner had slammed down the nightly tariff amount onto the counter top in front of the old bloke and asked him to immediately take himself, his missus and his fancy rig and get out of the Park.....

But.....he got a free night's 'board and lodgings' and as the Park Owner theorised, he wondered how many other places had refunded the fee just to be rid of him.....

It makes you wonder why a person like that gets on the road at all as it is obvious that they really don't enjoy that life-style.....and try earnestly to upset every-one that they may come across.....or was it just their normal friendly nature at work?

pcb©

Late March/early April 1999

(Transcribed from my Trip Journal, saved, then resurrected, amended with photos added and included into my Short Story Portfolio 19/06/2010)

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