"We had good meals, plenty of nice vegetables, plenty of fish, plenty of ducks and geese..." : food and eating in outback Territory, 1900-1950

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INTRODUCTION

This is the text of a talk given by Dr. Lyn Riddett in 1994 in the Library's 'Under the Banyan Tree' series of lunchtime lectures and films.

Lyn was a lecturer in history at the Northern Territory University, and has made a particular study of Top End cattle stations, looking at the various social ramifications as well as at the industry's history. Having herself worked in Territory homesteads, she is uniquely placed to write about the domestic scene, which is generally ignored by the male oriented cattle industry studies.

This paper naturally follows on from Lyn's two previous talks, "Growing up in the pastoral frontier", and "Recreation and entertainment on Northern Territory pastoral stations 1910-1950"; (Occasional papers no. 23).
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"The Mole waggled his toes from sheer happiness, spread his chest with a sigh of full contentment, and leaned back blissfully into the soft cushions. What a day I'm having!" he said. "Let us start at once!"

"Hold hard a minute, then!" said the Rat. He looped the painter through a ring in his landing-stage, climbed up into his hole above, and after a short interval reappeared staggering under a fat, wicker luncheon-basket.

"Shove that under your feet," he observed to the Mole, as he passed it down into the boat. Then he untied the painter and took the sculls again.

"What's inside it?" asked the Mole, wriggling with curiosity.

"There's cold chicken inside it," replied the Rat briefly; "cold tongue, cold ham, cold beef, pickled gherkin, salad, french rolls, cress, and widgeon. Spotted meat, ginger beer, lemonade, sодa water."

"O stop, stop," cried the Mole in ecstasies. "This is too much!"
I cannot be alone in revelling in such descriptions of food so lovingly told. When I read accounts of their lives by settlers in the Northern Territory I come across many similar lists... Settlers reminiscing about life on the frontier often vividly recall the food, or lack of it, that was so important to them. The title of this paper is taken from one such account and I am sure Ruby Roney was talking for more than herself. Ruby as a girl in the early 1900s lived with her aunt and uncle - Sarah and Paddy Cahill - at Oenpelli. The land was good to them in providing all those important elements in good food: freshness, good quality and variety. Life at Oenpelli was abundant in that way and the Cahills husbanded the land, taking advantage of what was available. Paddy even developed a dairy and for a while the station produced its own butter.

Thus was life in Arnhem Land in the early days of the 20th century. A little later than that, in 1930, Noreen Freer, wife of Cecil Freer, joined him for a short while on Stuart Station, at Point Stuart, and her diary talks also of bounteous nature providing a good quantity of high quality food. She was a good shot and often provided the fresh pigeons which Nora, their Aboriginal cook, served grilled accompanied by tinned French beans and potatoes. For dessert they ate fresh fruit.

If we cast our attention inland to the drier parts of the Territory, people were not so fortunate, and passage of time did not necessarily improve matters. In 1906 Mrs Townsend reminisced that on Victoria River Downs Station they lived off:

\textit{beef chiefly... for two days we have fresh beef, then salt beef till the next killing; we have some vegetables, plenty of milk and cream, and for at least two months out of the 12 we can get butter. The rest of the time is too hot. All our fruit is tinned. There is plenty of food, rather monotonous to style, but I like it.}

During the Wet, cattle station people could find themselves not liking the monotony and really minding the lack of fresh food, as this interviews with Lex Simmons about food at VRD in the 1950s shows:

\textit{but when we were eating over at the overseer's quarters and the cook was still there, well, for instance, we'd get up and we'd have breakfast. Well, you'd have a slab of steak for breakfast (And onions if you were lucky.) That would be only if you were lucky...}

\textit{And toast with this rancid butter but there was always tinned, ...golden syrup... and then for lunch you'd have cold meat and either one day you'd have tomato sauce would be on the table; the next day it would be Worcestershire sauce would be on the table; the next day there would be chutney; and the next day there would be, um, mustard pickles.}

\textit{And the next day well you went back to the tomato sauce again. Well, that's all you got for lunch. That was cold and that was only beef and that was it. At night during the wet season. Now, for dinner at night, you would have, um, salt beef, hot, with just onions... If there were any onions.}

These then are the physical boundaries of this paper: the north of the Northern Territory, from the Barkly Tablelands, to the Roper River, across to the Victoria River District, and back to the east to Arnhem Land. The time boundaries are the 1900s to the 1950s. And because Rat and Mole were having such a good time, a small celebration, perhaps we could re-enter the mood set right at the beginning of this paper and have a look now at festive occasions.

It would be quite reasonable that outback settlers, on the cattle stations, would want to celebrate the big occasions, such as Christmas, New Year, birthdays, farewell parties, in a joyous and bountiful way. Who were the guests? On big stations like Victoria River Downs the list could be extensive despite the station's isolation. The European staff alone could number twenty, then you would have to add families of staff, travellers passing through, and guests, invited for the occasion, from other stations or, even, town. How to feed a large gathering? And with what? Naturally people would expect festive food, and at Christmas that
used to include roast meats, roast vegetables and... Christmas pudding and Christmas cake. Imagine
cooking such food in temperatures above 40° in primitive kitchens, and over solid fuel stoves. But that
might not be the only problem. Sarah Fogarty who accompanied her husband to work on cattle stations in
the Roper and Victoria River districts faced another dilemma:

The stores were often old when she finally received them on the stations. On Newry, for example, the
bulk stores arrived every six months. Sarah often found the dried fruit full of weevils, particularly on the
Vesteys and Thoneman properties. Mard quite clearly remembers her mother washing and rewashing the
fruit; ending up with only a few cupfuls in the end. This was then put to good use in a cake or fruit buns. In
later years, when she was living in Katherine, Sarah always had fruit cakes on hand to send to her sons
out on the station.7

Sometimes the stores were in a worse condition than being old and weevilly. Once in each year right
through the 1920s and 1930s a camel train delivered the stores to Vesteys' stations. Other stations, for
example Alexandria Station on the Barkly Tablelands, also had goods brought in by camel. Mrs Johnston,
wife of the manager of Alexandria in the 1930s, has reminisced about having to deal with food stores
brought in this way. The food smelled of the camels! And because it had been so long on the road the
flour would be full of maggots. The only way to deal with it was to sift the flour and put it out in the sun.
Mrs Johnston did not personally undertake the tasks involved, as manager's wife her job was to
supervise:

... and you'd get the blacks, they had great big round things like this with gauze in the bottom and they'd
sit in the sun and shake it like this, then it would be re-bagged and hung on wires in the store -wires
across the store - it would be hung there, and pieces of gitty was put in there to keep the weevils out.8

Making a cake, as you can see, was no simple matter. Next the cook had to find eggs. Where did the
eggs come from? Sarah Feeney remembered that in the early part of the century her family travelled with
hens in a coop at the back of the dray.

S.F.: We had eggs, you see.

INT.: Yes, you had eggs from your fowls, and the fowls travelled in ..... 

S.F.: Big coop.

INT.: Covered wagon?

S.F.: No, not in the covered wagon. At the back of the wagon. With two big barrels of water beside them.
Sometimes they used to lay going along and sometimes when we got into camp. Father used to put the
ladder there, and they'd come down the ladder, and scratch around, and they might drop their eggs while
they were scratching around.

At night time, we'd just put the ladder back down and they'd go up and we'd shut them up, and they'd be
ready for the next day's travel. And that's how we used to get along.9

While the Fogarty family were on Marrakai Station in the mid-1930s Aboriginal people used to supply
Sarah with geese eggs and she was able to make the biggest sponge cakes ever seen!10

At Wimmera Home, the small Australian Inland Mission hospital on Victoria River Downs Station, one of
the grandest occasions of the year was the Christmas Party for the white men working in the district.
Sometimes the men brought their families, and often the two AIM sisters had to cater for more than thirty
people. Cakes were a central feature of the festive board, eggs were needed for the cakes, but the local
hens did not always comply. One year the cake nearly did not eventuate because the 'hens refused'. This
was soon remedied by the black house boy Syd who called on the neighbouring station Humbert River 30 miles away and returned with five dozen eggs.\textsuperscript{11}

Let us come now to more mundane matters. What of everyday life? Important as food was as sustenance, sometimes its function in station life was significant in maintaining crucial social markers. In different aspects of its provision, preparation and presentation, food was a means of separating people along gender, race and class lines. We shall come later to a pathetic story from the late 1930s where a woman suffered because of a mix of gender and class distinction that surely must have been peculiar to the cattle industry.

On most stations, the supervision of the preparation and presentation of food at the homestead was the missus’ job. The role of white women as civilisers of the bush incorporated this life-sustaining task and men, white men that is, appreciated the efforts women made to present the finer things in life. Appreciation and expectation were bound together - women responded as much to the latter as to anything else, and performed their duty even when appreciation was not forthcoming. Men were not lacking in the sense of finer things however, and they expressed it in accounts they have made of their lives in the bush. Gordon Broughton in his book \textit{Turn Again Home} wrote about Argyle Station which he visited in 1908 just before he took up a position as book-keeper on Lissadell.

\textit{Here, to my delight, I found a gracious stone house, creeper-covered with flagged path and garden. Presiding over the household was Miss Kathleen Durack, an attractive bright girl of about twenty-six.}

\textit{In the evenings we sat at a dining room table laid with silver and spread with a snowy cloth. The gins actually wore dresses and it was clear that Kathleen expected her men to spruce themselves up at meal times. The decorum of Argyle... was in marked contrast to the pagan ways at Lissadell where the lubra bringing our meal to table was often as not dressed in a shirt so short that there was nothing left unrevealed.}\textsuperscript{12}

Tom Ronan, another cattle station raconteur paid tribute in \textit{Once There Was a Bagman} to the AIM sisters at Wimmera Home:

\textit{After weeks, perhaps months, of squatting on logs with a blackened quartpot of tea and a hunk of overland brownie, the sheer physical satisfaction of sitting on a chair, sipping tea out of dainty china, nibbling at some tasty delicacy, was something to relish. And a half hour's general chat with an intelligent woman - and the A.I.M. had room for no other sort - was the only social interlude a bagman was ever likely to enjoy. No matter who you were or what you were, all these bonny women asked of a visitor was that he should be sober.}\textsuperscript{13}

At the Home the nursing sisters were their own cooks and they shared this job week and week about. On the other week, when the sister was not keeping house, she was nurse on duty. During the late 1930s the sisters had the assistance of two Aboriginal women and an Aboriginal man. These staff assisted in the housekeeping tasks of laundering, cleaning, wood-chopping, garden watering and so on. There is, however, no mention of them being involved in food preparation. From station to station practice varied: on some stations Aboriginal women cooked for the owner/manager's family under the supervision of the `missus'; on others Aboriginal women were off-siders to the main cook, in the days before World War II usually a man employed by the station; and on others again, Aboriginal staff were restricted to household tasks that kept them out of the kitchen. Some `missus' would not permit Aboriginal women into the house at all!

Helen Skardon, who employed Aboriginal women in the house, rather peevishly complained in an article in \textit{Walkabout} published in 1937:
It is quite possible to train the gins to do domestic work more or less; but it is a very uphill job and a long one at that. It took three lessons a day for weeks before Sarah was able to set the table, and then she invariably left the jam-spoons off or put the knives on the left side. After a long and tedious tuition, Mary "Toby" became quite a dab at waiting. Once, during the breaking-in process, I had occasion to ring for something left off the table, and she thought it was to remove the plates. She hesitated for a moment at the door, then rushed in and seized the nearest plate, which happened to be full of soup. Its owner also made a grab at the same time, and the result can be imagined. Mary fled. On another occasion Mary picked up the roast in her hands and sailed majestically from the room, leaving the dish stranded on the table!

Mrs Johnston on Alexandria Station was apparently more fortunate with her 'staff'. Perhaps it was more that she was kinder, more humane, and therefore rewarded with loyalty and attentive service.

Because I trained domestics, a half caste girl, and she was a fantastic girl and so did Mrs Smigg- and the Resident Governor asked us would we let them go and go and work in Government House because they were fully trained. They could wait on the table. I used to put a cap and gown - you know, an apron and a cap on her head - and so did Mrs Smigg - and we put them into uniforms and taught them the right thing to do. Take the plates the right way, and they could look after anybody. Serve coffee or tea the same as we could. But they were exceptional.

The big stations, ones like Alexandria and VRD, with a large number of people employed, usually tried to maintain a good vegetable garden, because it was difficult to obtain fresh produce unless it was grown locally. So, in season, and usually under the supervision of the cook, vegetables, such as tomatoes, pumpkin, beans, carrots, were grown. On some stations there were small orchards of fruit trees such as mango and paw-paw. Bananas were also grown. At VRD the station manager's wife sent fresh produce, and fresh goat's milk, daily to the sisters at Wimmera Home.

When fresh produce was available the food eaten at the main house was different in kind, and, to some extent, quality to the food eaten in the Aboriginal camp. The situation on Alexandria Station, while the Johnston were there in the 1930s, was a good example of this form of distinction.

But we made bread. Our cook made twenty loaves of bread a day. So, the blacks got big slices of bread - they didn't cut it thin, they cut it about that thick, and gave them two big slices of a whole round of bread to the gins and boys that worked around the homestead. They were given that on a great big dish like that, with the meat up one end and the bread up the other. Then they'd have onions, (raw onion) and treacle or something like that.

Beryl Spreadborough remembered a slightly different pattern from her childhood days at the much smaller Delamere Station during the 1950s. When Beryl reminisced about those days she told her interviewer that Aboriginal staff

...all had tin plates and you'd give them corned beef - 'cause rarely did we have fresh meat, maybe for a week after we first killed... So they had corned beef and bread and pickles, stack of pickles, and maybe a raw onion... but we ate exactly the same thing. I know we used to eat tinned peas and beans, whether they ate them or not I'm not sure - but mainly it was bread and meat and pickles. (emphasis added)

One distinction, however, was made at Delamere, in the supply of that most important item, tea. Beryl remembered that 'they never got fresh tea...' Aboriginal staff were given the dregs of tea from the previous meal at the main house. So, for example, at smoko the cook would put the remains of tea from her family's breakfast into a billy, add a lot of sugar, and top it up with fresh hot water. Then the Aboriginal staff took the billy to their camp along with food described above. At lunchtime, they were given the left-over tea from smoko, and so on. Presumably, at breakfast they were given the left overs from the previous night.
The cook on Delamere at the time was a man, and that was the custom, in the stock camps that was the rule. There were few exceptions. Many are the stories about the camp cook - Tom Ronan and Tom Cole, among others, have entertained us with the doings of camp cooks they knew. Pernickity, flamboyant, drunk, sour, taciturn - these are the common descriptions of camp cooks. Sometimes, they could not even cook as one young man explained in a letter home from the Durack Kimberley Stations. The year was 1906 and Frank Eipper was writing to his family in Scone, NSW.

The camp cook is about twenty years of age and knows nothing much about anything, least of all preparing food. This is a pity as Argyle is the best station for tucker in Kimberley. We have any quantity of rice and dried fruit allowed us, also currants, pickles, sauces, jam, honey, treacle, syrup and coffee. The cook can have anything he wants. There is any amount of game here - wild geese, ducks and turkeys galore but we do not bother them much. We often have fish, though...

Our cook has just been sacked. I'm not fretting over it either. I've never suffered from indigestion in my life before...\(^\text{19}\)

Later, in 1907, Eipper wrote about Lissadell Station: 'It is a nice little homestead with good out buildings, ... a Chinese cook and six lubras to wait on us, so what more could a mortal want'.\(^\text{20}\)

Tom Cole also employed a Chinese cook when he was head stockman running No 1 camp on Wave Hill Station in 1927. According to Cole, the cook, old Ah Ping, was a good old fellow 'but he hated horses... he always had to have a very, very quiet horse that, you know, if he fell off the horse would stop.'\(^\text{21}\)

Cole knew how important horsemanship was if one wanted to be a camp cook. When he himself had been vetted for the cook's job at No 2 camp on Brunette Downs in 1927, Jack Everett the head stockman had asked only one question: 'Can you drive a four in hand?' In Cole's version of ensuing events it becomes clear what driving a four in hand had to do with cooking:

I see them slicking these horses into the thoroughbrace with blindfolded and bags over their heads and this sort of thing, well then we got them hooked up and everything and I'm sitting up there with the ribbons and everything and the foot on the brake and holding everything in, wondering what's going to happen next. Somebody forgot to buckle the reins onto the leader; see, your reins goes down through the rings and through the hames and onto the leader, one leader - and I didn't know - old Jack says, 'You right, Tom?' 'Yes, I'm right, let them go; let them go,' and they all pulled the bags off their heads and all looked around to see where they were (laughter) - took off. Well, I had to go through a gate; see there's this little paddock just around the homestead, somebody was supposed to open the gate, no, the gate wasn't open, forgot about that.

No, here I'd 4 mad horses and one with no bit - no reins on the bit at all, no control whatever, and I could do a bit with the nearside leader, but I couldn't do nothing with the offside leader. They got to the gate and they propped and swung and went down the fence; they got into the billabong and turned the whole caboose over; went over in the billabong in the mud. So that fixed that for a day or 2; so they smashed the pole and kicked their way out of the harness; they found 2 of them a week later with collars and blinkers on. So that was my introduction to being a cook. Yes, so I've been a professional cook.\(^\text{22}\)

It is from Tom Cole, as well, that we learn what was considered basic camp tucker on those black soil plain stock camps. Nothing as fancy as the fare Frank Eipper ate on Argyle Station was ever given to the men on VRD, Wave Hill and Barkly Tableland Stations. There the rations were:

...always the same, flour, tea and sugar was the mainstay of the staple diet, and you'd get cream of tartar and soda... for making dampers... and hops to make yeast to make bread.
...you had to have a highly qualified cook who knew how to make yeast and bread, and you'd have lots of
dried fruit and dried vegetables and things like that. A few tins of fruit, treacle, jam, so forth, that would be
about it, and plenty of salty meat.23

Cole used the same staples when he was running buffalo shooting camps in Arnhem Land in the 1930s.
The only fresh food in regular supply, apart from beef immediately after a beast was slaughtered, were
onions and potatoes.24 And yet Europeans who grew up on cattle stations have many childhood
memories of good fresh bush tucker collected under the guidance of Aboriginal companions.
Unfortunately, they were usually forced to stop this practice once they reached school age. Then they
were constrained by the civilising influence of schooling. They began being 'grown up' into their roles as
master/missus - a process which separated them from their Aboriginal mates... and the good times.

Although it was unusual for women to cook in stock camps, Ann McGrath in ‘Born in the Cattle’ says it did
occasionally occur.25 In the contract fencing, yard building and drilling camps women often cooked.
Indeed, it was not uncommon for whole families to accompany the contractor. Kitty Bernhadt went out to
cook at a fencing camp job contracted to her husband on Killarney (outstation of VRD) in 1920.26 In the
1930s the Gorey family, including Mrs Gorey and her daughters, all camped together with the drilling
team, and the Gorey women cooked for the camp.27 Dorothy Hall cooked in her husband's buffalo
shooting camp in Arnhem Land during the 1940s.28

The matter of what role European women played in the preparation and cooking of food on stations
seems to have been affected by two main factors. The first is obvious: whether or not European women
actually lived on the station in question. Secondly the period appears relevant: evidence seems to
suggest that up to the 1940s it was not a common practice for European women to do more than
supervise in the kitchen. An obvious exception to this was Sarah Fogarty who often cooked at stations
where her husband was overseer or manager. Ellen Johnston, who often stood up for her rights, in a
discussion with her husband CAY, eventually won him over to employing a woman as cook on Alexandria
during the 1930s. CAY resisted for some time because, in his opinion, 'there'd be too much ruption on the
place if you bring a white woman here - the men had no connection with a woman...'.29

When the female cook finally arrived at Alexandria the Johnstons had a bit of a surprise as Mrs Johnston
recalled:

When she arrived on the coach I was so pleased. She said, to me, well, I'm not a cook, I'm a laundress. I
had to go down and tell Dad she's not a cook, she's a laundress, but if you give me a stock camp cook for
one week and he can teach her how to do the rough cooking (such as boiling beef and cooking big things,
and making bread) I'd teach her the other finer parts of cooking. So he did, and I had her for eight years.
So I was very pleased about that. That was something I won when I went out there. Then some of the
others got white women cooks. We became more civilised. Women came into the Territory and worked
then - cooking women I mean - women that cooked - before it was all men. I wasn't the first. We had
some Chinese and some Japanese. That was part of the isolation.30

Leonie Wilmington came to the Territory in 1946 inspired to see the country and was happy to go to
Nutwood Downs Station as a cook. Her description of the Station show how primitive conditions could be
as late as the 1940s, but as her story also shows cooks managed anyway:

Had all ant bed dirt floors. It had a cupboard - there was supposed to be a sideboard inside, it had a leg in
that corner, a leg in that, and a pile of old papers there, and a drum here, and that's what it stood on, and
there was this great big iron dray wheel, that made an arch, and just inside that there was the pedal
wireless, and down this end - it had been all lancewood lattice, but that had - the white ants or something
had gotten to it, so there was a big iron door, and the lubras every night, used to go up carefully and put a
padlock on it and lock it and then walk out the side of it.
And the kitchen was all ant bed and fat,... but between the table you worked on here, making your bread and the stove, there was a great big boulder about this big, it was too big, they couldn’t get out so up you went, and over it...31

Woman’s place might have been in the home, and might sometimes have even been in the kitchen. The decision, however, about whether or not a woman was in the kitchen, was most often made by the station manager, or even, in the case of the big company stations, by the pastoral manager - a more exalted and distant arbiter. There was a case in point on Gordon Creek outstation of VRD in the 1930s. It was, no doubt, an extreme case, but that can hardly have been much consolation for Audrey Reynolds, the young English bride, whose life was made miserable for a short while by a camp cook.

The Bovril Company, who owned the station, had decreed that Gordon Creek should have a cook and had employed a particularly unpleasant man for the job. He would not let Audrey into the kitchen, and he also decided at what times meals should be served. Audrey was at home on the station with her baby son, West, while her husband was out at the stock camp. The baby was a difficult feeder, and Audrey spent many hours at night trying to calm him when he was upset. Still, at 6 o'clock each morning, Audrey had to be up to eat the breakfast cooked for her - the cook refused to negotiate a later time, and would not let Audrey into the kitchen to make her own breakfast in her own time.32

Outrageous? Well, yes - but only an extreme case of a practice prevalent in the industry.

This paper started, however, on a high note and it is fitting that we return to a lighter note to finish, the final word goes to Ellen Johnston:

...Well, I really did. My life in the Northern Territory was one of the happiest days of my life. I think it was, maybe, because well, I was happily married, and I didn’t have any worries or any troubles, and I never had any upsets of any kind, and I enjoyed it. When I went first, I was lonely, very, very lonely, but then I adapted myself and made myself realise, well, this is my life and I’ve got to live it, otherwise, what’s the good of me being here.

Well, I read and I wrote letters and I had the children. Once the children arrived I was busy. And there was always something to do on Alexandria - somebody wanting something or somebody coming or somebody doing... even although we were isolated. And there were meals five times a day; there was breakfast, there was smoko, there was lunch, there was smoko again in the afternoon, dinner and then usually if any of the men happened to be up in the house reading the papers which came for the station (they were brought up to the house) and they happened to be sitting, I’d make a cup of cocoa for them before they’d go home. Things like that. So there was always something to do.33
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5. *North Queensland Register* 5 February 1906 'Woman's Life in North Queensland' (sic) (p23)
6. *NTAS NTRS226 TS349. Interview with Natalie Walker and Lex Simmons* (p27)
8. *NTAS NTRS226 TS250. Interview with Mr and Mrs CAY Johnston* (p56)
9. *NTAS NTRS TS202-1. Interview with Sarah Feeney* (p7-8)
10. Ogden (p37)
13. Ronan, T. *Once There Was a Bagman*. Australia, Cassell, 1966 (p206)
15. *NTAS NTRS 226 TS250* (p85)
16. *ibid* (p95)
17. Spreadborough, B. Interview with Dawn May 1987 (tape in possession of author)
18. *ibid*
19. Durack (p153, 157)
20. *ibid*
21. *NTAS NTRS226 TS29. Interview with Tom Cole* (p42)
22. *ibid* (p43-44)
23. *ibid* (p42)
24. *ibid* (p33)
27. *ibid* (p122)
28. *NTAS NTRS226 TS228. Interview with Dorothy Hall* (p35)
29. *ibid TS250* (p65)
30. *ibid*
31. *NTAS NTRS226 TS358. Interview with Leonie Wilmington and Ivy Atkinson* (p10)
32. Personal conversation Mrs Dorothy Hall and the author, 1986
33. *NTAS NTRS226 TS250* (p104-105)