MEMORIES OF
PRE-WAR
NORTHERN TERRITORY
TOWNS
By Alec Fong Lim
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INTRODUCTION

This talk by Alec Fong Lim was delivered at the State Reference Library of the Northern Territory on 10 May 1989, as one of the Library's 'Under the Banyan Tree' lunchtime entertainments.

Darwin's former Lord Mayor recalls his early life in the Territory. His experiences in Katherine, Alice Springs and Darwin in the 1930s, 40s and 50s reflect in microcosm the life of the Territory, the rough, 'last frontier' Territory before the advent of air-conditioned Land Cruisers, fridges, or parking inspectors.

What comes through clearly in this talk is that Alec was a man of the people, and that, in achieving his exalted rank, he did not lose 'the common touch'.

A happy picture of Alec Fong Lim on the footplate of the historic train at the Fannie Bay Gaol Museum, 1984 (Northern Territory News Collection, State Reference Library of the Northern Territory)
MEMORIES OF PRE-WAR NORTHERN TERRITORY TOWNS

Today I will try to paint a brief picture for you of life in the major Territory towns in which my family and I have lived over the last fifty-odd years.

My parents were born at the turn of the century in two now defunct towns, Fountainhead and Yam Creek, both near Pine Creek. Their parents came to work in the goldfields situated in the Brocks Creek area from a Cantonese district in the 1880s.

George and Lorna Lim were married in Pine Creek in 1921 and my two oldest sisters, Mary and Lily, were born there. Dad was tailoring at the time. They moved to Emungalan about 1924 and ran a general store. My oldest brother Arthur was born there. Emungalan was sited about where the Katherine Civic Centre is now located. In 1926, when the railway bridge over the Katherine River was completed, the whole town moved over to where the main town of Katherine is now.

I was born in Katherine in 1931, and the town was also the birthplace of the five remaining members of our family. I started school in 1936 at the age of five. My most vivid memories of my three years at school there were the annual picnic days, which consisted of the whole school - about twenty-two of us - walking to the low level crossing, which in those days was called Springvale Crossing.

There were several White Russian families peanut farming on the northern side of the river. My brother Arthur and one of the older boys
used to swim across the river and bring back watermelons for all of us. Some of the Russians were Long John Ivanetz, Paul Zimmin, John de Julia, Alex Gorrie, who died recently aged 107, and a few others whose names I cannot recall. We used to be invited to their Easter celebrations, and I will always remember the coloured eggs and Russian sweets they gave us.

Of course, Clyde Fenton, the famous Flying Doctor, was there, and I can clearly recall him 'bombing' us with bags of flour, and one day of him actually landing his small plane on the main street. Another vivid memory of Dr Fenton and Sister Olive O'Keefe, who passed away only a short time ago, was when they came to the school to give us immunisation shots. The larrikins and great teasers of the school were Eddie and David Fogarty. These 'big' boys told us younger ones that Dr Fenton and Sister O'Keefe were going to cut our things off. As soon as the Doctor's car arrived at the front gate, the whole school jumped up and started to run for the bush!! However, we were all caught, except for Arthur and Horace Lee, who lit off for the donkey camp up river from Notts Crossing where my uncle had a farm.

Another person I knew very well was Sergeant Bob Wood, the local policeman, and it was he who chose my Scottish name Alexander. The Fox families were there, as was Tim O'Shea and his daughters at the pub. Mrs Roney was our neighbour, there was Roy Pedersen the butcher, and George Lee, the other Chinese who also ran a store up at the other end of the street to us.

Dad had a general store where we all helped after school, and Dad was tailoring as well. There was no electricity, no refrigeration and no
entertainment. Our biggest event each week was to meet the train, and, if we asked nicely, the guard would give us each a small piece of ice.

Occasionally, Dad used to buy a bullock for one pound from drovers, and he would shoot it from the branch of a tree whilst the herd was quietly grazing. Then he would butcher it on the ground and we would have lovely fresh meat for a few days.

Our refrigeration was the Coolgardie safe. This was a contraption which was covered with hessian, kept wet constantly, and hung in the shade where the wind and wet hessian combined to keep the contents cool. Our lighting was carbide lamps, later advanced to petrol pressure lamps. We lived okay without any luxuries because we did not know of anything else.

George Lim's store, Katherine, 1931. Bobby Wood (son of police sergeant) at wheel of truck, with Arthur Lim. One of the Lim sisters sitting outside the store (Alec Fong Lim Collection, State Reference Library of the Northern Territory)

Dad also ran a peanut farm next-door to where Bert Nixon now lives. Bert was one of Dad's best mates.

However, in 1938 Dad thought our family should try the big smoke, and so we sold up and moved to Darwin in September of that year. Imagine the consternation amongst the Chinese community, whose businesses were exclusively in Cavenagh Street, when this country bumpkin bought a business in Smith Street - the white man's domain!!

'You will never succeed', they said. 'The whites will not trade with you and you must operate in Cavenagh Street.'

1 two dollars
Of course, saying you cannot do something to Dad was like waving a red flag at a bull and he was determined to succeed. Through hard work and loyal support from Mum and the kids, we did make a go of it.

We had bought a tailoring business and shop from Keith Jessop, who still lives in Darwin, and we also had a milk bar in the store. The shop consisted of half the building right next-door to the then Star Picture Show, which was an open-air construction with canvas seats. The back half was covered and was on two floors, but the front downstairs was reserved for our Aboriginal population, who were only allowed there on Wednesday evenings.

We all lived above the shop. Next-door was a Ceylonese jeweller, Mendis. Darwin was a very run down town then. The population was under 2000 I reckon, and over 300 were Chinese.

We had two schools, the convent and the public school. The public school was on the site of the Woolworths car park in Cavenagh Street. My first teacher in Grade 3 was Miss Williamson, who later married Ern Tambling, the pioneer teacher of the Top End. Mrs Tambling still lives in Darwin, and, of course, one of their children is Senator Grant Tambling.

My recollection of Chinatown was a series of ramshackle corrugated iron buildings. Some of the old shop names were Man Fong Lau, Wing Cheon Sing, Wing Wah Loong, C P Cheong, Fang Chong Loong, Wing Sang Toy, and Yam Yan (the famous Pak Poy family, brought up in Adelaide during and after the War). I remember Zero in the Tropics, a Japanese Lemon Squash shop where they used fresh lemons, syrup, and shave ice - a great drink.

My after-school job included helping Arthur deliver groceries on our bikes with baskets on the handle-bars. I was also in charge of the small tobacco counter we had, selling Craven "A", Red and Blue, Capstan, State Express, Ardath and Turf cigarettes, Log Cabin, Capstan and Champion tobaccos, "Tally Ho" and "Riz-La" cigarette paper, and stick tobacco for chewing. When I grew older I used to sell roasted peanuts during the interval at the Star, charging sixpence for a small packet of Mum’s special salted nuts.

Mrs Bleeser operated a shop just the other side of Browns Mart and AE Jolly and Co were the big traders on the corner of Bennett and Smith where the Reserve Bank Park is now.

The Victoria Hotel was run by Mrs Gordon and her son Cookie. The Don Hotel was on the corner of Bennett and Cavenagh Streets. The Hotel Darwin was newly opened, and run by Mick Paspalis and Lawrence, I believe. The Parap Hotel was where it is now, and this was then the only pub there.

A very vivid event stands out in my memory of those days. It was in later 1941 when there were many troops in Darwin. A riot broke out in the Vic Hotel, which quickly spread into Smith Street. I can remember it quite clearly and I have a photo of Arthur in our broken

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2 five cents
shop window looking at the damage next day. He was being watched by
the two James girls, Lil and Joyce. The damages were all blamed on
the soldiers, but I remember that a lot of civilians took the opportunity
to ransack my beloved tobacconist shelves.

Civilians were evacuated in December 1941 and our family returned to
Katherine, except for Dad and Arthur, who were left behind to pack up
our stock to send on to us at Katherine. However, February 19th beat
them to their task, and they were still here when the Japanese bombed
Darwin.

We stayed in Katherine until March 1942, when the town was bombed
for the only time during the War. Nine planes dropped their bombs on
the airfield and one Aborigine was killed. We were then evacuated in
two small planes to Alice Springs, and stayed there until 1945.

We had a very small shop in Todd Street next to the Stuart Arms Hotel.
One side of the shop was a small cafe, furnished with a long wooden
table and bench along the wall. Those who failed to get a place at this
table ate their steak and eggs, ham and eggs, sausages and eggs or eggs
on toast standing up or sitting in the gutter outside. All meals cost 3/-,
or 30 cents in today's currency, and this included bread and butter and
a cup of tea. We also were famous for my sister Mary's meat pies,
undoubtedly the best ever sold in this country.

The other side of the shop was a small tailoring department, and again
the Lim's puggarees or hat bands were famous throughout Australia. We
sent them everywhere.

The Victoria Hotel, showing damage caused by rioting troops and civilians, August 1941
Alice was a really small town and the population was swelled by the influx of the Administration Branch, relocated there from Darwin. The town was also used as a staging camp for the thousands of troops who were poured into the Territory for its defence. They used to come to Alice on the Ghan in cattle trucks, and were then convoyed north.

The Stuart Highway was only a dirt track, but it was bitumenised very quickly after the Darwin bombing. However, contrary to some people's perception, it was not built by the Americans, but the CCC - the Civil Construction Corps. The CCC was made up of many State Main Roads Departments and it was they and the AWC - the Allied Works Council - who built the road.

We went to Alice in early April, and we did not know what hit us that first winter. We had always enjoyed the warmth of the Top End and the bitterness of the Alice winter was unbearable. The kids all suffered chilblains on their ears and flies gave us all bung eyes. My early memories of Alice are definitely not good.

We all lived in a sleepout alongside the shop. There was no heating at all and the wind used to blow through the inadequate walls. This was my first experience of water freezing in the pipes and not being able to use the taps. It did not help of course that the bathroom and toilet were 20 metres away in the backyard.

Again the whole family worked in the business. Before I went to school each day I had to help Arthur get the meat from the butcher, and also, in the summer, whole blocks of ice for our lemon squash. I was pretty nifty on a bicycle in those days.

After school, I had to squeeze lemons on an old hand squeezer, peel a bag of potatoes, slice them into flakes on an old bacon slicer - most times I sliced the tops of my fingers trying to get that extra flake. Later in the day those potato flakes had to be cooked in a container of fat over an open fire in the backyard. A hessian screen was put up so the fire would not blow out.

So you can see, life was not meant to be easy. However, we all survived and managed to enjoy a bit of fun as well.

I attended Hartley Street School, being the only one there other than the convent. Our teacher was Les Dodd, who later rose to better things in the education field both in Darwin and in South Australia.

Alice Springs was a very small town, and some of the people and shops I remember from those days are Mona Minahan - still going strong - Heenans, who had the first milk bar and orchard, Charlie Quee and family, F W Sing, Ah Hong, the old Chinese market gardener, Jim Clark, the woodcutter, Lackmans, Wallis Fogarty, Murray Neck and family, Len Tuit, who pioneered Ayers Rock tours, the Afghan camaleers who used to camp near the abattoirs just before Heavitree Gap and used to give us chips of what we thought were rubies, but were really worthless red stones.

Don Thomas was there, the Kilgariffs, the Hayeses, Bob Buck of Lasseter fame, the Turners, D D Smith, the Cloughs, the Adamsons
from the Post Office, the Lovegroves, Sergeant Bridgland, Reg Leydin, Carrington, the Government Secretary, Brigadier Loutit, whose headquarters were across the road from us, and many, many other early day families.

In 1944 I won a Commonwealth Scholarship, as it was then known in Grade 7. As there was no high school in Alice Springs or the NT, Dad sent me to Scotch College in Adelaide.

The journey on the Ghan, which was an old steam train, took three days and two nights, including a change of trains at Marree. The experiences on those train trips would be another complete episode. Suffice to say that it was long, slow and boneshaking, but when you are thirteen and leaving home for the first time it was a great adventure.

The family had left Alice in 1945 and taken a well-deserved break in Adelaide, Melbourne and finally Sydney. They returned to Darwin and opened up shop again in June of 1946.

I did not return from Adelaide until Christmas 1946. Transport from Alice to Darwin was on some hard planking on the back of an open trailer which was run by Lackmans or Tuits. It required three days and two overnight stays, which, I think, were at Tennant Creek and Katherine.

The trip was made bearable by the company of the Spain family, Felix the barber and Mrs Spain and their lovely daughters, Lily Stevens, and Sheila Nichols, who still lives here, as, of course, does Dennis, but he was only very little then.

Darwin 1946 - a man's town; very few women, beer hard to get; cigarettes and tobacco rationed; no fresh fruit or vegetables; no Woolies, Big W, K Mart or Coles; meat tough as shoe leather and bring-your-own wrapping paper; buildings very shoddy; shocking roads.

Darwin's boundary at about Parap; a few Army 'Sydney Williams' huts at East Point, Stuart Park and Nightcliff; no Fannie Bay suburb, just the old airstrip (now Ross Smith Avenue); the 'Belsen' camp, a series of one-man huts just opposite the Catholic Cathedral in McLachlan Street; Mareenah House, the girls dormitory, where the Travelodge now stands; illegal betting shops and gambling houses where Pi Que was the popular game; bush race meetings on a track graded out of the bush past Knuckey's Lagoon; wrecks of ships in the Harbour; Neptuna right alongside the main wharf; Meigs, British Motorist, etc; the sea teeming with fish, mainly skinnies and white fish, now called trevally and queen fish; bream in the winter caught by the hundreds from the wharf; population about 2000 and everyone knew everyone.

Conditions were hard but life was lived to the full - in more than just an alcoholic way.

Sport was the youths' main recreation. Soccer and Aussie Rules were strong - no Rugby until later. But basketball was king in the fifties. When the population was under 5000 we would get crowds of 1000 at the big games.
Men's teams included the nearly unbeatable Urgers, which included names like Riley Wing, the captain/coach, Joey Sarib, the champion goal shooter, and Mick and Jack Haritos and Les Liveris, who are still here. The Rusty Valley Team, the Chinese Team DCRC (Darwin Chinese Recreation Club), and later the Pioneers, which was comprised of many famous Darwin sporting families like the Bonsons, Ah Matts, Lew Fatts, Cubillo's etc.

The brilliant women's basketball team, The Galahs, headed by deadly Dallas Wood the champion goalshooter, who often recorded scores of 100 goals on her own. This was a composite team of teachers, like Dallas, students, mainly Chinese, like Pearly Chin, Marion Wee, Isabel Lim, and defence players, such as Dorothy Durack and Lucy White.

Our family bought the Vic Hotel from the Gordons and started operating in September 1946. I returned at Christmas that year and went straight to work in the pub. I was only fifteen and three-quarters but under the law I could work as I was family, but could not actually sell liquor. So I started as cashier and general oddsbody, helping the yardman, counting money in the office, etc, etc.

Imagine the shock I experienced going from the cloistered confines of a boarding college to a man's pub in a frontier town!! I survived and loved the whole nineteen years I worked at the Vic. It gave me a great grounding for my present day job as Lord Mayor in being closely associated with people and listening to their troubles and complaints. It also prepared me for recalcitrant Aldermen.
The Vic was the social watering hole and the office to all the folks from the bush - the buffalo hunters, crocodile shooters, mining prospectors, as well as our local regulars the NT News' staff, and the bank's staff, all in their white shorts and long white socks, who had a special corner.

Old Bourrie Hayes, the black sheep of the Hayes family, who owned and operated so many ferries and tourist resorts in Cairns and Northern Queensland; Dick Ward, who later became a QC and a Supreme Court Judge; Tiger Brennan, who was Mayor of Darwin at the time of Cyclone Tracy in 1974; Ron Withnall, Crown Prosecutor and retired in Darwin; Evan Herbert from Koolpinyah Station and Roy Edwards who lived above Cashman's shop, now Darwin Newsagency.

Of course, Dick Ward, Tiger Brennan and Ron Withnall were all members of the Legislative Council and were among the Councillors who presented the Remonstrance to the Federal Government in Canberra seeking self government for the NT in 1962. Other members who are still living in the Territory are Joe Fisher and ex Senator Bernie Kilgariff. It took until 1978 to achieve this aim, and hopefully I will live to see the day when we achieve full statehood.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is just a brief outline of my early memories of some of the Territory towns and I hope you enjoyed my ramblings.