FROM PORT AUGUSTA TO DARWIN

A SAGA

Awaiting our transfer from Port Augusta to Darwin emotions varied from numbness, sheer panic, excitement and anticipation at leaving the State and going to the virtually unknown. Darwin had not become part of the tourist trade at that time and opinion as to its assets and drawbacks was very contradictory.

Finally, our goods packed in two furniture containers and our car were lifted onto railway trucks, and we were on the train bound for Alice Springs which was the end of the line.

In those days accommodation on the train was fairly comfortable. Each "dog box" or compartment was roomy, had long leather seats, bunks which folded down at night, as they still do, an electric fan and windows which could be opened both in the separate compartments and in the aisle which ran the length of the carriage on one side. Each carriage had its Guard who was responsible for the welfare and comfort of his passengers and those men took their jobs very seriously and stayed in that occupation for many years. Most of the guards were well known to the people travelling in the Northern Territory and one in particular had a nickname. The Ferret, as he was called, was thought to be able to hear a cork popping or a beer being opened from three carriages away; it was said that he could knock on the door and ask if anything was needed. The guards had to keep extra vigil in the school holidays when adventurous youths would be found sitting on the sills with their backsides hanging out of the windows. The speed of the trains was often so slow and people were wont to brag that they had dropped off the train and run alongside for a time. In any case the train rocked from side to side and children could have toppled out. Derailments were frequent partly because the line had been laid with minimal ballast and the rails would buckle easily. Once, a few years later we watched the progress of the train and were horrified as the carriages swayed from side to side and the rails writhed in torture as it passed.

The journey to Alice Springs took a couple of days. It was a nice interlude with meals served with great pride with silver service on starched white tableclothes and the food was excellent.

It was not possible for passengers to keep drinks cold; eskies had not been invented. A cool drink could be obtained from the canvas water bag with an enamelled mug attached by a chain which hung at the back of each carriage in the breeze. So that on arrival in Marree the men made a dash for the pub while the engine was changed and the supplies for the township unloaded. The stop-over was not for very long, and some men who were not allowed to leave the train (experienced female travellers were very canny) made arrangements with one man to bring back supplies. Shortly after the warning blasts on the horn had signified our imminent departure, the men were getting anxious as everyone else was on the train, when the delegated one appeared with a sack full of bottles (14 in all) ran for the train and fell down a hole recently dug for a post. Some thirsty blokes dived off the train, hauled him on board, and not a bottle was broken.

By the time we were approaching Oodnadatta, Milat had been schooled in the procedure of getting supplies in that place. It was tantamount to denying one's man-hood not to try to be part of the rush. The secret was to jump off the train as it crawled into the station and make a run for the pub/store. This he successfully did and found himself amid a crowd of shouting jostling mad-men. He was standing quietly in amazement when the barman turned to him and said "as you're not being an animal, what's yours?" So he got his beer and was back on the train before anyone else.
It was very hot when we arrived in Alice Springs in mid-morning. We had to wait for the "chaser" the second train which closely followed the Ghan carrying cars and freight. This was not expected to be in Alice till late afternoon. We wandered around, there wasn't much to do or see, but we had our first taste of "Squashy Sing's" lemon squash. Squashy was a Chinese tailor who augmented his income by making and selling this drink which had small slivers of ice in it and he kept it in large galvanized tubs and dished it out with a glass jug. There has never been known anything to beat it.

We were travelling on "expenses" so we went to Jock McKenzies cafe for a meal. We had to have receipts for everything. The waitress happened to be the wife of an electrical fitter in the railways, an equivalent position to Milt's; and when her husband came to collect her we were introduced. His name was Billy Faure and they took us home to their place to await the arrival of our car and then they escorted us through the hills. A year later we were back again as their next door neighbours and Billy and Milt worked together.

It was dusk by the time we left Alice bound for Aileron to spend the night. Even in the half-light the terrain had already changed. We could see small termite mounds which looked like still kangaroos and low scrub. About half way to Aileron we were stopped by a truckie whose semi had broken down and he needed to get to Aileron to ring up for parts. We squeezed him in. On arrival in Aileron we found that there was no accommodation. The truckie wanted us to take him back to his truck but not even the promise of remuneration would persuade us to do that. Then while we were making camp a big semi-trailer began to roll slowly down the incline. Milt was quick enough to yell out to someone and get in and use the hand-brake. We then bedded down somehow in the car with a mosquito net and tried to sleep. Although we had had a long hot day, the strangeness of it all, the mozzies (as large as moths) laughed at our nets, and the noise from the pub, stopped Milt and I from sleeping much and we took off next morning as soon as it was light enough to see.

We had breakfast on the way to Tennant Creek and there were plenty of new sights to see. The road was bitumen but not much more than a car's width, having been built in haste in wartime, but not much traffic. It was soon very hot and by the time we got to Tennant Creek I was ready for a cup of tea. The others all got a cool drink. While the tea was being made I sat on a metal chair. Now I was wearing shorts and lesson number one, don't do that if you don't want a burnt backside. I watched the shop assistant make the tea, which he did by putting the teapot under the tap from the rainwater tank and filling it without boiling it at all. He said it was almost boiling anyway!

We pulled into the store at Elliott. It was then the only place of habitation. The shop was open but no-one came out. After a while Milt went into the back of the store and found a man who said "What do you want?" He said that we needed petrol. The man said "Well, that's all right then. Most people either want water or a packet of cigarettes and its not worth stopping what I'm doing (whatever that is) to serve them." Now, with the reconstruction of the Humber, we had put in new large petrol tanks, on either side under the body, with a switch so that one tank could be emptied and then the other. Most bowseres then had to be pumped up by hand, when the big glass bowl it the top was full, the petrol was gravity fed into the car's tank. So the man pumped up the first lot and emptied it in, then he did that again, and again; then he looked under the car to see whether it was gushing out as fast as he was putting it in. He looked at Milt and he told him to keep going. Eventually he had to ask "What's going on?" So Milt explained what the capacity was. The man hadn't done so much hard work for ages.

We then went on not very far to Newcastle Waters, a little way off the highway, where there was a hotel/store about where Kerry Packer's big spread now is. We were accommodated in a separate building at the back. This was the first real tropical building we were in. It had wooden windows which lifted outwards to allow a breeze. Milt and the proprietor hit it off straight away. We had managed the longest part of our journey and I expect Milt was feeling a bit relieved. A deal was made. We would get a receipt for
accommodation and meals, and any grog consumed would be listed as dessert. The kids and
I had our meal and they had a bath and washed their hair. By this time it was dark so we went
to bed. I didn't think Milt would be long, and I didn't fancy being out there without any light.
as we had been warned that the generator would be turned off about ten. I couldn't get used
to the sound of the crickets and the frogs. These were all new sounds and the warm humid
atmosphere was also different. I expected Milt would come when the generator stopped but
waited and waited. Then I thought maybe he had fallen over in the dark. I was too scared to
venture out into the really black night. Eventually he arrived and I was ready for him. I told
him what a big thing he was expecting us to do by going into the unknown, how scared I had
been, etc. etc. I could have saved my breath. As soon as his head hit the pillow the world
started to spin. So we were up and down all night. I didn't know how much mess we left
outside after each time he was sick, neither did I care. The bill was made out as arranged
but I really think that the "dessert" consisted of mixed spirits, it was certainly expensive.
Next morning I had to drive with frequent stops and I was promised it wouldn't happen again. Ha.
What's more the kids hair had been washed in bore water and they all looked like strays
from the slums.

As we neared Larrimah, where the railway line from Darwin terminated, it became
increasingly obvious that we were into the tropics. There was a sprinkling of railway homes
with gardens. Boganvillia in various colours, hibiscus and many large-leafed colourfull
plants vines etc. The pub had a garden, too, but we didn't stop. The line was still in use
but it was obvious from the litter of rusted equipment that it had been much busier during
wartime. The vegetation at the side of the road had changed and vines and long grass grew
among the eucalypts. Somewhere north of Mattaranka we reckoned that fuel was getting
low. The petrol tanks which we had had made were not baffled so that as there was less
petrol more sloshing could be heard. The tap was turned so that both tanks had some
capacity. As we neared Katherine the engine would seem to lose power and Milt would turn
the vehicle from side to side so that the left hand tank which led straight to the fuel line
would have more in it. We knew that sooner or later there would be an air lock and when it
happened we stopped and drained the remaining fuel into a gallon tin. Milt then opened the
bonnet and sat on the side and fed the petrol with a hose direct into the carburettor. Now the
bonnet of this car was in two pieces hinged from the middle, and when he had the left side up
it folded over somewhat to the right and I had to drive blind with him directing me. There
wasn't any traffic. Maybe people in that area wouldn't have thought it odd to see a man with a
handkerchief with four knots in it on his head squatting on half the engine of a large English
car with the bonnet up being driven by a blind woman. The boys enjoyed it anyway.
Fortunately it wasn't long before we came to the outskirts of Katherine and then the engine
coughed and we stopped. With Alison still in the back of the car, we all pushed with Milt
steering from the side, much to the amusement of about twelve Aboriginal men and boys,
none of whom offered to help, naturally. We filled up with petrol at the garage and went
down to the Low Level of the river where we all cooled in the lovely soft water. We sat in
the edge on the sandy bottom of the slow flowing water; the kids washed their hair and baby
Johnson crocodiles nipped at us. Sometimes later we stopped to take the following photo of
a giant magnetic termite mound. It was then that we discovered that Graham had left his new
sandals at the River, and it was too far to go back.

Most fuel in those days was held in 44 gal. drums. Sometimes water got in. Sometimes
drums of what had been high octane petrol were "confiscated" from disused air strips and
sold to unsuspecting travellers. Whatever. For the rest of the day's journey to Pine Creek we
had many stops to clean either the carburettor or the fuel line.

We had previously booked ahead to spend the night at Pine Creek Hotel. This hotel was
well run by two well known gay men known at that time as "a pair of Poofers" and many
other things. The hotel cook, a woman previously living on a small mine, had left her
husband and come into 'town" for some life. She made sure that the beds were properly
made for Milt and I and the girls but explained that due to a mix up the other room booked for the boys had been taken, so they had to sleep in the car with mosquito nets. She advised us by the way not to disturb the green snake in the outside toilet (the only one) as it was there to do the job of eating the green frogs who sat on the ball of the cistern and weighed it down so that the water ran all the time. We avoided the toilet for as long as we could and made Milt come with us whenever we had to go. The meal was actually very good and after that everybody seemed to congregate in the beer garden where there was a large bird cage. The cook who always had a glass of beer in her hand or on a shelf nearby suddenly turned nasty screaming that there was a snake in the birdcage and that it had a bird. Some gallant male got a shovel, entered the cage and despatched the snake. A drunk then burst into tears, picked up the snake and stroked it saying that it was only a bandy-bandy snake and they were all his friends. The cook continued to rave and the language became more colourful so we decided to go to bed. But it didn't stop there. The two men in the room next to us decided to have a fight, things got a bit hairy until the small, young owner appeared at their door with a pistol aimed very steadily at them and told them to get out or he would shoot. They went and all was quiet.

We had a comparatively uneventful run to Adelaide River the next morning. We were getting hungry so I went into the only store. "Sorry, love. The stores haven't come, but I can sell you a packet of biscuits. The biscuits were full of ants and when I pointed this out she offered threepence off as they wouldn't eat much.

When we arrived on Railway Hill where several residences were scattered around a grassed area, we saw that our furniture vans were waiting for us. Two of the houses were new, the Gigney's were in one, and ours was the other. Such co-ordination of circumstances would not likely occur today.