THE NORTHERN TERRITORY
OVERLAND TELEGRAPH

An Epic of Courage — Just 100 Years Ago

[By GLENVILLE PIKE, F.R.G.S.A.]

(Read at the meeting of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland, by the President, Commander N. S. Pixley, F.R.Hist.S.Q.)

Construction of an overland telegraph line from Adelaide to Darwin just a century ago was one of the great achievements of Australia's pioneering days. It is a story that cannot fail to stir one's imagination, but it is one that is little known today.

Had this great undertaking been performed in the United States, film producers would have been in their element; but in filming this story, they would not have to draw on fiction. The real thing would provide all the "excitement" needed.

It is an epic of courage, endurance, and high adventure — a few fearless pioneers bridging almost 2,000 miles of untamed continent from sea to sea with a single wire on a line of poles along a route only once before traversed by white men.

John McDouall Stuart, possibly Australia's greatest explorer, was the first to successfully cross the continent and return.

John Ross, a peerless bushman of South Australia's northern frontier, was to blaze the route for the Overland Telegraph, and Charles Todd (afterwards knighted) was to be in charge of construction.

Telegraphic communication — the wonder of that day — had been proposed between England and Australia for some years. It involved the landing of a submarine cable somewhere in the North, then a land-line southward to the capitals of the different Colonies. There was keen rivalry, often bitter, between each Colony in those days, thirty years before Federation.

There were two contenders for sites for the landing of the submarine cable: Queensland and South Australia.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA'S CLAIM

Stuart had had an eye to the future when he had talked
about his route to the Northern coast being suitable for the
construction of a telegraph line.

It was Stuart who favoured the Northern Territory, then
a No Man's Land, unclaimed by any Colony, becoming part
of South Australia.

Upon his return from his last expedition, he wrote, early
in 1863, to Sir Dominic Daly, Governor of South Australia,
that the route he had taken across the continent "could be
made nearly a straight line for telegraphic purposes, and
there are no real obstacles to the overland transport of
stock; by temporarily annexing the country alluded to, it will
be rendered available for colonization in the shortest time."

Stuart had named this new country Alexandra Land after
the Princess of Wales.

South Australia was progressive and expansionist on a
pioneering level. Lightheartedly its people accepted the
challenge of acquiring half a million square miles of un­
tamed country, even though their own Colony was only 27
years old and had only 80,000 inhabitants and its own
northern region was an almost impregnable desert.

South Australia had men equal to the task in that age of
the pioneer.

On 6 July 1863, only eight months after Stuart's return,
Letters Patent were issued by the British Government, bear­
ing the signature of Queen Victoria, empowering the South
Australian Government to annex the whole of "Alexandra
Land" as that Colony's Northern Territory. A country
without a proper name it has remained ever since.

A strip of country on the eastern border was given to
Queensland, pushing that Colony's frontier westward from
the mouth of the Flinders River to the 138th meridian. Had
this not been done, Burketown, Mount Isa, Cloncurry,
Boulia, and Birdsville, would be within the Northern Terri­

Within a year of annexation, South Australia attempted
to form a settlement on the northern coast, at Escape Cliffs
in Adam Bay near the mouth of the Adelaide River.

The site was a bad choice, and the settlement was aban­
doned at the end of 1866. In two years, 14,000 acres had
been surveyed into blocks that had been sold on paper in
Adelaide and England for £93,000.

The South Australian Government soon found it had taken
more than it could effectively manage when it annexed
the Northern Territory. The people who had paid for their
lands were clamouring for their money back, but the Gov­
ernment had spent it all on the fiasco of the Escape Cliffs
settlement at the mouth of the Adelaide River. So it must therefore provide the land.

**JINX DOGS SETTLEMENT**

The only answer was to try again to form a settlement in the North. It seemed that the old jinx that had dogged the three attempts at settlement by Great Britain in the Northern Territory also dogged South Australia’s brave, if muddled, efforts.

There were other stirrings in the air that forced South Australia to try again. Plans were being made, and as quickly changed, to build an overland telegraph line across the continent to some point on the northern coast to connect with a submarine cable from England.

Queensland was in the race, and bitter inter-Colonial jealousies raged. Already Queensland had established a Northern outpost, Burketown, at the mouth of the Albert River, in 1865, and in 1867, Normanton had been founded.

South Australia was determined to forestall Queensland in any overland telegraph project. It became imperative to re-establish a Northern outpost.

**FOUNDING OF DARWIN**

George Woodruffe Goyder, Surveyor-General of South Australia, sailed with his party from Adelaide on 27 December, 1868, in the barque “Moonta” and the schooner “Gulnare”. His orders were to survey and establish a settlement and to survey 320 acre blocks for the Land Order holders and any future settlers. The ships anchored beside Fort Hill in the glorious harbour of Port Darwin on 5 February, 1869—Darwin’s foundation day.

On the narrow neck of land formed by Fort Hill, at the foot of red and white sandstone cliffs, Goyder set up his camp in the shade of tamarinds and banyans, planted by unknown Chinese and Malay sailormen perhaps centuries before.

On both sides was the sweep of the harbour, with Emery Point and Stokes Hill named for the men of H.M.S. “Beagle” in September 1839. Stokes had named the harbour after the famous Charles Darwin who had been on board the “Beagle” on an earlier around-the-world voyage, under Captain James Wickham.

About 70 feet above was an extensive plateau overlooking the harbour—a peninsula that afforded natural access into the interior.

Here, Goyder surveyed his city—straight streets two miles
long across the peninsula named after his surveyors—Smith, Mitchell, Daly, McMinn, Bennett, Knuckey, McLachlan, Woods, and Packard Streets, with Cavenagh Street named after the Land Commissioner of South Australia. Survey work commenced on 4 March, 1869, and 665,866 acres were surveyed into 320 acre blocks within 70 miles of Port Darwin.

If a submarine cable was to come ashore here at Port Darwin, the infant settlement would be given stability and permanency, the South Australian Government reasoned. The Queensland Government was thinking the same thing about its settlements in the Gulf Country.

Hoping the cable would, in fact, come ashore at either Burketown or the mouth of the Norman River as had been predicted in London, Queensland, then only a struggling six-year-old Colony with immense natural resources, but an almost empty treasury, sent explorer Frederick Walker late in 1865 to find a route for a telegraph line from Cardwell to the Norman River. The whole northern half of Australia—one and a half million square miles—was unsettled wilderness at that time.

**QUEENSLAND’S BID FOR THE O.T. LINE**

Here it is of interest to us in Queensland to digress a little from the Northern Territory and describe Queensland’s bid to achieve telegraphic communication with its northernmost outposts at that time.

In 1953, the late J. W. Collinson, F.R.G.S.A., a former Treasurer of the Historical Society of Queensland, wrote a pamphlet entitled *“Key Tapping in the Tropics—Early Days of the Electric Telegraph”* for the Postal Institute. Mr. Collinson wrote:

“On 13 April, 1861, the first telegraph line in Queensland was opened. This was from Brisbane to Ipswich, and by the end of that year Lytton, Gatton, Toowoomba and Drayton were linked up. The line reached Rockhampton in 1862, and Bowen was connected to Brisbane on 20 October, 1866, Townsville on 15 March, 1869, and Cardwell on 29 December, 1869.

“The erection of these telegraph lines through virgin country, across high mountains, swamps, and through dense tropical jungle, where the threat of fever and wild blacks was ever present, were great feats of endurance on the part of the workmen, and achievements for so young a Colony as Queensland then was. The overland telegraph was the first device of man’s ingenuity to conquer the vast lonely
Some of the men who built the Overland Telegraph—Workmen on the left, Mitchell Patterson, Todd, and other leaders on the right. This photo was taken at Leichhardt Bar on the Roper River in 1872.

(Photo by Courtesy S.A. Public Library)

First Post Office at Port Darwin, 1870

(Photo by Courtesy S.A. Public Library)
distances of this continent, one of the outstanding examples being the erection of the line from Adelaide to Darwin in 1870-72. On 9 June, 1869, the Queensland Government decided to establish telegraphic communication with the Gulf of Carpentaria, by way of Cardwell . . .”

A North Queensland historian, the late Hugh A. Borland, wrote as follows in the “North Queensland Register” on 26 December, 1959:

“Back in 1865, the Queensland Government engaged Frederick Walker to carry out investigations for possible routes for telegraph lines, the first being from Cardwell on the east coast to the mouth of the Norman River. At that time there was every possibility that a cable would be landed at some point in the Gulf from England, and Queensland was anxious to establish overland communications. However, South Australia won the race by having the cable landed at Port Darwin, and by building a telegraph line across the continent to Adelaide.

TELEGRAPH LINE TO THE GULF

“Early in 1866, the ‘Port Denison Times’ (Bowen), quoting the Brisbane ‘Courier’, stated that Frederick Walker was leaving for the North by way of Rockhampton, at which point he would board the Platypus and proceed to Cardwell. Accompanying the explorer would be an officer of the Telegraph Department, two other white men, and four of his old native troopers. It was stressed that great difficulty would be experienced in finding a route over the ranges between the coast and the heads of the Gilbert River. (Walker was to die of fever on the Leichhardt River.)

“Bowen and Townsville were linked by telegraph line, and it was pushed northwards to Cardwell. The workmen underwent considerable hardships, especially in the scrubs south of Cardwell where fever was rampant. Contractor Strickland brought the line into Cardwell late in 1869, and early in 1870, a little ship, the ‘Isabella’, brought materials for the new section to be erected over the ranges to the Gulf.

“The Seaview Range behind the little outpost presented a formidable barrier, but it was already traversed by a dray road of sorts to Scott Bros.’ Valley of Lagoons Station, and those thousands of men and women who had rushed pell-mell to the Gilbert Goldfield had travelled over it on horseback and on foot. Places on this road of yesterday were known as Half Mile Scrub, Stony Pinch, The Saddle, and The Gate.
“Reported the ‘Port Denison Times’ on 3 December, 1870: ‘The inner section of the telegraph line from Cardwell to the Etheridge River, a distance of 200 miles, is being carried out by the Telegraph Department under the supervision of Mr. A. C. Macmillan, inspector of Roads Department. Government parties of 40 men each are on the work. The line has been completed for 16 miles from Cardwell and the necessary clearing has been carried out to a distance of 25 miles from the same place, which takes the work over the most difficult portion of the country it has to pass through’.

“The paper reported that it was expected the first station, Cashmere, about 60 miles inland from Cardwell, would be opened in a few weeks. (It was opened in October 1871) . . .

“For the outer section, from the Etheridge to the mouth of the Norman River, the contractor went around by schooner, and commenced work with a party of forty men at Normanton, on 11 July, 1870. By December, 70 miles had been cleared, but the timber was found to be unsound for poles. A station building was erected at Normanton.

“The ‘Port Denison Times’ reported, also on 3 December, 1870: ‘Arrangements are being made to procure iron poles for the country from the Gilbert River to the mouth of the Norman, a distance of about 150 miles, which is destitute of suitable timber . . . There is little doubt that the telegraph line from Cardwell to the Gulf shores will be completed early in 1871, well ahead of our South Australian rivals . . .’

“This expectation was not realized, however. The line was completed on Wednesday, 3 January, 1872.

“The schooner ‘Active’, skippered by Captain Delarge, who had a beche-de-mer station on Darnley Island in Torres Strait, conveyed the iron telegraph poles and other material to Normanton for the contractor at that end, S. W. Murfield. The first telegraph message received at Cardwell from Normanton read: ‘Wet season has set in. Two ships are at anchor, the ‘Day Dawn’ and ‘Heather Bloomfield’.’ As from 13 January, 1872, weather reports appeared in the Bowen newspaper from Normanton. In October, 1871, the first weather reports were telegraphed from Cashmere, then in succession came Junction Creek, and Georgetown’.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA CHOSEN

Queensland did, in fact, complete its telegraphic link to its outpost on the Gulf on the northern shores of Australia
seven months ahead of its “South Australian rival” but it failed to get the submarine cable so the line was of local use only.

When Sherard Osborne, director of the British-Australia Telegraph Company, arrived in Australia early in 1870, he favoured South Australia’s claim for the cable to be landed at Port Darwin and a telegraph line to be built across Australia to Adelaide. He was, no doubt, influenced by Charles Todd. When Todd and his wife, Alice, arrived in South Australia from England in 1855, there were no telegraph lines, but within a short time he had successfully constructed a line between Adelaide and Melbourne.

Surveyor-General G. W. Goyder and his men had not been idle at Port Darwin. Apart from surveying land into blocks for potential settlers, they had also done exploring.

Surveyor A. J. Mitchell had found a practicable route inland from Port Darwin to the upper Adelaide River at the end of March, 1869—“A capital route for the commencement of an overland telegraph line and for a dray road to open up the interior”, he reported to Goyder.
Goyder had vision and enterprise. He had faith in this new tropical wilderness so richly endowed by Nature, and he declared in his diary: "South Australia has no reason to fear the result of her connexion with this place. Sooner or later it must turn out well".

**AN INTOLERABLE BURDEN**

Alas, South Australia was not destined to benefit; 42 years of heartbreak lay ahead during which time the Northern Territory was to prove an intolerable burden to the parent Colony until the latter was glad to cede its northern possession to the Commonwealth to recover a debt of 6 million dollars it had incurred trying to develop it.

But back in those brave days before Federation was dreamed of, each Colony fought out its own future under the protection of a benevolent Home Government, and pioneer South Australia, lacking the goldfields that had made Victoria and New South Wales prosperous, had drive and initiative, inspired by a pioneer-spirited Premier, H. B. Strangways. Despite earlier set-backs, his Government was still dazzled by the potential of its northern possession, especially when a surveyor, Frederick Litchfield, revealed the presence of gold in the Port Darwin hinterland. In September, 1869, Litchfield and Burton found traces of gold in the Blackmore River.

Goyder's report delighted the Government. Public confidence had been restored and it forged ahead with plans to develop its northern outpost. Everything hinged on South Australia being chosen for the landing of the submarine cable. In June, 1869, Port Darwin, and Goyder's survey camp, was opened for settlers.

A few gallant pioneers took the plunge, and in December sailed from Adelaide with the Government party in the barque "Kohinoor" of 300 tons, skippered by Captain Slater.

**FIRST SETTLERS AT DARWIN**

On 1 January, 1870, 60 men, women and children stepped ashore in Port Darwin, at Fort Hill, under the muzzle of the little brass cannon that had guarded Goyder's survey camp and near the graves of two of his men: J. W. O. Bennett who had been speared by the blacks, and Hazard who had died of illness.

These people were Darwin's first citizens, and they pitched their tents and occupied the surveyors' abandoned huts in the shade of the tamarinds and pandanus palms. The
buildings were of bark, saplings, pandanus trunks, canvas, and tin, and were known as The Camp.

As the Union Jack was run up on the flagpole on Fort Hill's flat summit, the settlers gave three cheers for Queen Victoria and three cheers for Palmerston, the name chosen for the new settlement, in honour of the British Prime Minister.

Over a century ago, Port Darwin's lonely settlers were nearly as isolated as if they were in Antarctica, until the telegraph line was built. It was the first step towards making Darwin "the Gateway to Australia"—a phrase that was to wear rather thin through the years.

The little schooner "Gulnare" was the only link with the outside world.

Eastward and northward around Queensland she had sailed from Adelaide to Port Darwin. Now westward around the Leeuwin and the Bight, back to Adelaide she flew before the wind in nearly 7,000 miles of sailing around the continent to bring more settlers and Captain Bloomfield Douglas as the first permanent Government Resident, or Administrator, of the Northern Territory.

He and his wife and seven children arrived on 24 June, 1870. They were awed by the magnificent harbour, appalled by the incredible isolation and primitive living (the first Residency was a bark hut with a canvas roof), and nervous of the wild Larakeeeyah warriors with bones through their noses and 12ft. spears in their hands, who swarmed from their camp near Stokes Hill.

PRIMITIVE SOCIAL LIFE

The Douglas daughters, Harriet and Fannie, and the young men of the settlement, provided a primitive social life, with concerts around camp fires to the music of concertinas, watched by hundreds of naked Aborigines with astonishment. Horseback rides with police troopers and surveyors provided other entertainment, Harriet Douglas riding with cartridge belt around her waist and a Colt revolver on her sidesaddle for fear of the natives.

Harriet was to find romance in the North, wedding young Dominic Daly, dashing bushman nephew of the Governor of South Australia. He had been a surveyor with Goyder and stayed to help pioneer the Territory. Harriet was to write the first book written about this land (Digging, Squatting, and Pioneering), published in 1887, and it is a valuable historical record today.

One evening late in June, 1870, when a glorious tropical
sunset was bathing the beautiful harbour in a red glow, the barque "Bengal" sailed in, the sunset glowing on her canvas, bringing the great news that the overseas cable was to come ashore at Port Darwin and that the overland telegraph was to be constructed across the continent.

The British-Australia Telegraph Company had agreed to lay a cable from Java to Port Darwin in preference to the longer route from Java to Normanton. But it was contingent upon South Australia erecting a landline from Adelaide to connect with it at Port Darwin by 1 January, 1872.

CONSTRUCTION BEGINS

South Australia had won the battle for the cable and the telegraph line, but it had less than 18 months in which to bridge 2,000 miles of wilderness! It could take nearly that long for one bullock team to cross the continent, even following a blazed track, and there was none.

But Governments moved quickly in those days. The
sum of £120,000 ($240,000) was voted immediately to launch the gigantic scheme. Charles Todd had his plans ready and construction parties were assembled in Adelaide—all in six weeks.

South Australians accepted the challenge with delight. They would show the other Colonies, especially Queensland, what they could do! Victoria and New South Wales seemed to look on the whole scheme as sheer madness.

Adelaide’s 30,000 people went wild with excitement. Hundreds of men rushed for jobs. They were prepared to endure hardship and loneliness and to risk their lives facing hostile tribes and waterless unsettled, and almost unknown country for anything up to two years, for 25 shillings ($2.50) per week. No refrigerators, air-conditioned accommodation, iced drinks and other amenities in the bush, or anywhere else, in 1870. Corned beef and damper was the fare; Worcestershire sauce and raspberry jam were rare luxuries. You had to be tough in the pioneering days.

On 20 August, 1870, horse and bullock wagons were cheered down dusty, rutted King William Street on the first stage of their journey into the Never-Never. Bonneted wives and mothers waved to bearded happy-faced men they would not see for two years or more, lost in the impenetrable silence of the North.

Several would not come back—they would find journey’s end among the arid gibber plains or ancient hills of the Centre, dead from thirst or by Arunta or Warramunga spear.

**NORTHWARD THE WAGONS**

It was an impressive array that set out that day long ago—the first wagon wheels to roll further northward than any had gone before. There were six horse-drawn express wagons, 180 horses and 220 bullocks. They were loaded with more than 150 tons of stores, tools, wire and insulators.

In those days of the bullock wagon, it took a very long time for a team to cross a continent that was sheer wilderness with no settlement for 1,800 miles of the 2,200 miles the telegraph line must traverse.

In 1870, no wagons had penetrated further north than Macumba Creek, just west of Lake Eyre. The second construction party which left Adelaide on 5 September, did not reach the point where it was to commence work, just north of Tennant Creek, until eight months later.

The work was divided into three main sections: from Port Augusta to the Finke (the N.T.-S.A. border), from
Finke to Attack Creek, and from Attack Creek to Port Darwin.

There would be 37,000 poles, planned to meet near Central Mount Stuart with construction taking place from both the southern and northern ends.

Work on the central section, from the Finke to Attack Creek, was undertaken by the South Australian Government. Private contracts were let for the remainder.

Edward Meade (Ned) Bagot secured the southern contract and Darwent and Dalwood the northern (Darwin) section. Construction price was from £65 ($130) to £92 ($184) per mile according to the supply of poles in the area. Where there was timber within reach of the line, durable trees were cut by teams of axemen and hauled by bullocks to the site.

In the treeless regions of the Centre, iron poles were carted by bullock teams up to 1,000 miles from Port Augusta.

**AT THE NORTHERN END**

From the time the barque "Bengal" brought news that the telegraph line would be constructed, the handful of settlers at lonely Port Darwin had scanned the empty sea horizon from East Point for sign of smoke or sail.

After three months of waiting without any news, the little steamer "Omeo" slipped in and anchored off Fort Hill one morning of blazing heat early in September, 1870.

The ship was laden with men, horses, drays, bullocks, and equipment for construction of the Overland Telegraph.

There was no jetty, so the horses and bullocks were swum ashore, the drays were floated on to the beach, and everything else man-handled from rowing-boats. There were plenty of stevedoring problems at Darwin in 1870, but there were no complaints or stoppages!

Darwent and Dalwood, the contractors, formed their camps in the shade of the mighty banyan trees at the end of Mitchell Street.

On 15 September, 1870, the first telegraph pole was erected, somewhere near the present Legislative Council building.

Harriet Douglas was given the honour of filling in the last shovelful of earth and announcing that construction of the Overland Telegraph had thereby commenced. The crowd of Government officials and bushmen raised a cheer. This was one of the greatest moments in the history of Port Darwin, and it was, indeed, possibly the biggest undertaking in Australia up to that time.
J. A. G. Little (Darwin's First Postmaster), R. C. Patterson (Engineer-in-Charge of the Overland Telegraph Construction), Charles Todd (Superintendent of Telegraphs in S.A.), and A. J. Mitchell (Chief Surveyor).

(Photo by Courtesy S.A. Public Library)

Erecting the first pole for the Overland Telegraph Line, at Port Darwin, 15 September 1870

(Photo by Courtesy S.A. Public Library)
For Darwin, the telegraph line assured its permanency and importance. It was still an isolated outpost, but it was also the capital of a brave new land—the Northern Territory of South Australia.

The pioneers—spirited planners, the surveyors and workmen engaged in this great enterprise—deserve our admiration and praise, but even the feat itself is unknown or forgotten by most people today. Who after 100 years knows the names of the pathfinders of the Overland Telegraph?


But few people now know who these street names honour.

JOHN ROSS

The greatest pathfinder of all was a Scotsman, John Ross from Dingwall, County of Ross and Cromarty. He had arrived in Australia when twenty years of age and since 1838 had been connected with exploration and pioneering in South Australia.

His fellow Scot, John McDouall Stuart, had shown the way across the continent, but it was John Ross who actually blazed the route for the construction parties from the southern end.

For several years, Ross had been exploring and forming sheep stations for others on South Australia's northern frontier—the desolate Lake Eyre region. Northward stretched the infinity of the Inland, clothed in a mantle of silence.

Three times Stuart had disappeared into the heat haze and after many months he had returned, a spectre of a man with skeleton-like horses. He had penetrated that wall of incredible loneliness at the cost of his health, and had come back, full of wondrous reports of the tropic lands that stretched beyond the desert to the dazzlingly blue Arafura Sea.

Ross yearned to see those lands for himself one day and seven years after Stuart returned for the last time, his chance came.

Ross was the only other white man who had been so far north, and he was the obvious choice to lead expeditions to blaze a route in advance of the telegraph construction parties. (Stuart had died in 1866).
Mrs. A. V. Purvis of Alice Springs, Central Australia's acknowledged historian, has lifted John Ross from the obscurity of the mists of passing years and by her years of diligent research has restored him to his proper place as the man who discovered the famous Alice Springs.

Mrs. Purvis states: "His first expedition as leader of the O.T. Line Survey Party was directly into the desert which Dr. Madigan renamed 'Simpson' in 1928, but when half way across it became evident that insufficient water was to be found for many following parties. His next was west of the desert, and then eastward into the ranges he named the Fergusson after the South Australian Governor of his time, to Hart Range, and the Waite River (which was also of his discovery and naming) then on to Central Mt. Stuart.

"From here he returned, on a route eighteen miles east of Stuart's track, to the Junction Camp at the Hugh River (of Stuart), to meet William Whitfield Mills, surveyor of Section C, for the first time. No doubt Ross would give him all the information available as Mills wished to go to the Strangways Ranges, a distance of about forty-five miles from the MacDonnell Range, to take a bearing due south, Alfred Giles records.

"From the Junction Camp this would mean something like a sixty-five mile ride 'as the crow flies' and which was quite impossible to make in a few days in so rough a country with its intricate topography such as the MacDonnell and Waterhouse Ranges. Also a range later named the Chewings Range in which the Todd River takes its rise and in which river the Alice Spring is situated. John Ross refers to this range in his second diary of the O.T. Line expeditions as 'the range north of the MacDonnell Range'.

"Making a third attempt, Ross and party, with Alfred Giles as second-in-command, left the Junction Camp (the Hugh River-Alice Creek junction) on 14th March, 1871, and after crossing Gilbert McMinn's tracks and the spot where he had made an attempt to find a passage, had become bogged and left his bullock dray and returned to camp, finally found a track which passed through what we know as Pine Gap and Temple Bar Gap. Here their course—because of the telegraph line which faithfully followed Ross's route—came a little south of Alice Springs' Anzac Hill of today, across the Todd River (named three months before on 14th December, 1870, vide John Ross Diary, 1870) and around our Spencer Bluff again across the Todd, and so to a waterhole, fed by a spring.

"Nothing would be known, or surmised, of all this had
not Alfred Giles always kept a diary and from which he wrote his wonderful book, 'Exploring in the 'Seventies'."

ROSS PRESSES NORTHWARD
Here, Mrs. Purvis quotes from Alfred Giles: "'We crossed Mr. McMinn's tracks at the Waterhouse. We were again in the wild orange country, and regaled ourselves on this fruit which, by the way, can by no means be despised in a climate and trip like this.

'On 18 March, 1871, when ascending a small hill, we were astonished to see three horsemen and two packhorses coming over the same hill, and in whom we recognised Mr. W. W. Mills, one man and a blackboy, who were returning from the Strangways Ranges, a distance of about 45 miles north-easterly. It was certainly a most extraordinary meeting in so remote a part of the world as this, and would have formed a most interesting sketch, but unfortunately none of our party was gifted with the art. A few minutes' chat and each party was again on its way, going in opposite directions. Such a meeting must have been unique in the world's history of exploring, that two parties should meet on the same but reverse bearing in the unknown centre of a continent. This meeting place was within a mile or so of what is now Alice Spring(s). . . .' Giles means, of course, the Alice Spring(s), as there was no town known as such in those days.

'Conflicting records of the movements of Mills and Ross in the few days prior to their meeting have led to an intriguing controversy as to whether Mills or Ross saw and named the Spring first. The Australian Encyclopaedia (1958) is for Ross; the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia, South Australian Branch (1957), is for Mills. But Alfred Giles' record shows that it was Mills' misfortune, by about a day, to therefore have missed the discovery of the Alice Spring(s).

'It was Mills' good fortune, however, to pass on the names of the physical features so well known to us, for Ross lost the diary in which his last expedition was recorded. It has never been located. Other surveyors, including R. R. Knuckey and G. McMinn, also made good the work in giving to posterity that charming locality with its historic names, that it is our pride to geographically possess.

'So good a bushman was Ross that he needed no surveyor to direct his passage, but with a copy of Stuart's map, a carpenter's lead pencil, and an ordinary pocket watch and
compass, he led his party successfully northward to the appointed place of meeting, at the Roper River.*

“The Hon. John Lewis in his book, ‘Fought and Won’, also adds to the theme. . . . Official records are interesting, but bare of that human touch displayed in both books mentioned. Ross’s two previous diaries of his expeditions, also his letter to Sir Thomas Elder concerning his ex-Macumba expeditions of 1868-69, are to be read in the Adelaide Archives and rooms of the South Australian Royal Geographical Society; but his third and most important diary was lost, undoubtedly during the chaos and desolation that greeted him upon arrival at the northern construction camps . . . .”

THE TELEGRAPH POLES MARCH NORTHWARD

There was no time to lose, for already the telegraph poles were marching northward through the Flinders Ranges and the axemen were cutting a swathe through the scrub north of the Finke. Ross was scheduled to meet surveyor William McMinn at Bitter Springs on the Roper.

McMinn rode southward from Darwin, three hundred miles each way, in April, but finding Ross had not arrived by then, he had buried supplies for him and had returned to the Katherine River.

Ross, Giles, Hearne, Gregory, and Abrahams were then urging their weary horses northward across the spinifex ridges and the purple-hued flat-topped ranges, and through the dense mulga scrubs south of Tennant Creek.

They were the first white men since Stuart, Kekwick, and Head to penetrate this domain of the fierce Warramunga tribesmen; they had attacked Stuart in force and with great audacity and had harried his retreat for a hundred miles in 1860, almost bringing disaster upon the expedition.

Now, with Stuart’s map to guide him, we can picture the rugged, bearded John Ross from Dingwall, Scotland, following the tracks of his brother Scot from Dysart, on that northward trek as he rode through the stunted mulga and topped the stony rises, long-barrelled rifle in his saddle-bucket, eyes alert for the smoke fires of hostile tribes in this vast untamed land that shimmered in the haze of distance, quiescent as a sleeping giant.

Slowly the country changed from the arid appearance of the Inland to the long grass, green trees, pandanus, and tropical vegetation of the land of heavy wet season rains.

* About 700 miles north of Alice Springs.
After 1,200 miles of riding from the telegraph construction camp on the Peake in northern South Australia, Ross and his men came to the one-chain wide swathe cut through the coolibah and woollybutt forest and granite hills between the Katherine and the Fergusson Rivers; then the miles of poles heading southward over the gold-bearing hills of Pine Creek that would eventually join those poles creeping northward, still well over a thousand miles away.

**DISASTER IN THE NORTH**

But Ross, ill with scurvy, was aghast at what he found. The construction camps of Darwent and Dalwood had been deserted for months.

There was no sign of human life. Construction of the telegraph line in the north had stopped! There were rolls of wire, piles of insulators, abandoned wagons—all fine loot for the blacks. Construction had stopped, yet South Australia had only six months in which to complete the line—an impossible task. It would take six months for a bullock team to haul one wagon carrying six tons from the Port Augusta base to the newly discovered Alice Springs, seven hundred miles from the end of the abandoned line in the North!

Ross, Giles, and their companions rode into Yam Creek, at the end of the telegraph wire only 120 miles south of Port Darwin, on exhausted horses one day in June, 1871. Little remembered now, they were only the second party of white men to successfully cross the continent.

Mrs. A. V. Purvis writes: "... Malaria, dysentery, and other diseases were rife from the Roper River camps to Darwin. By the time of his arrival even the staunch and unyielding Ross was smitten with scurvy. Even so, he had decided to retreat his footsteps back to the southern construction camps, his faithful party accompanying him. Finally, however, he was persuaded to go to Darwin and take boat back to Adelaide.

"We today scarcely appreciate with what difficulties our North Australia was eventually conquered. Many of us live in a fool’s paradise, the likes of which was never the dream of those stout souls who went before. Would that we, who continue to come after, could catch again something of their pioneering spirit! . . ."

George McLachlan was one of the pathfinders of the northern section.

On 23 July, 1870, one month after the "Bengal" brought news of the Overland Telegraph, McLachlan rode out south-
ward from Port Darwin in search of a route for the telegraph line. With him were five men named Wells, Dean, Ringwood, Mason, and Rix.

They took a course that brought them to the Mary, McKinlay, and upper Katherine rivers, partly following Stuart's route. They found two horses Stuart had left behind eight years before. The explorers then returned to Darwin. From Darwin, McLachlan's party had more or less followed the route of the present North Australian Railway as far as the Adelaide River—probably the first travellers to follow such a route. The intervening country had been explored five years before by Frederick Litchfield.

A handful of pioneers—cheerful, tough, bearded men on horseback—were in process of conquering a continent by establishing modern communications where none had existed before; through a land which had only just seen a white man for the first time and whose earth had never been touched by a wagon wheel before. This was the epic of the Overland Telegraph.

AGAINST GREAT ODDS

When Darwent and Dalwood, contractors for the northern section, arrived in Port Darwin in September, 1870, with their workmen, horses, bullocks, drays, and materials in the little steamer "Omeo", the dry season was already nearly over. These southern men had no inkling of the terrible hardships "the wet" would bring.

Storm clouds were beginning to build up in the north-west and the air was becoming more humid, the sun fiercer; the Wet would soon begin with the first storms. Meanwhile, the bushland inland from Darwin lay desolate and dry from many rainless months, without grass for horses or bullocks. There was no road of any kind, only a bewildering expanse of grey-green eucalyptus forest, with huge anthills like monuments 10ft. to 20ft. high, pandanus-fringed creeks and lagoons alive with wild geese and duck, the drying swamps full of wallows made by the great grey water buffaloes.

Following a tree-line blazed by George McLachlan, William McMinn, and other surveyors, a small army of axemen hewed a cleared avenue one chain wide through the coolibahs, woollybutts, and ironwoods, for the telegraph line. It was hard back-breaking work mile after mile southward from one river to the next, following the best route for horse and bullock teams—to the Darwin River and on to the Upper Adelaide, then on across many creeks to the McKinlay, the Margaret, Pine Creek, the Cullen, the Fergusson, Edith, and
the Katherine, for 220 miles—terrible work in humid heat, beneath a searing sun.

The broad iron tyres of the wagon wheels of Darwent and Dalwood were the first to cleave the virgin earth through the wilderness southward to the Katherine. If those pioneers could now see the Stuart Highway with its hundreds of speeding cars and huge heavily-laden transports every day, how surprised they would be!

Other gangs of men were out in the bush cutting suitable trees, mainly the termite-resistant ironwood and cypress pine, for poles, loading and carting on bullock wagons, sinking four-foot deep holes with shovel and crowbar, then raising the heavy poles with the aid of a patient horse on the end of a block and tackle.

Darwent and Dalwood could cope with the dry stages but they did not prepare for the wet, having had no experience of it. When their line of poles reached the Katherine River when the wet started they found their communications, like those of an advancing army, had been extended too far.

**ONSET OF THE WET SEASON**

With the onset of the wet season in January, 1871, no wagons could get more than a few miles out from Darwin to take supplies to the forward camps, and as the rains increased, with severe electrical storms day and night with monsoon rain finally roaring down from Java way, even pack-horses could not get through the bog or swim the raging rivers.

Men camped at the Katherine were starving. They had only a little weevily flour. Many were ill with fever and dysentery. But Engineer Paqualin, in charge, pushed the work on doggedly. He built rafts to cross the flooded Katherine and somehow got the line of poles erected southward to the King.

In steaming heat and drenching rain from severe thunderstorms, gangs of mutinous, hungry men axed the dense bush, sank post-holes, cut and snigged poles, horses and bullocks floundering and bogging.

The last of the stinking, weevily flour was eaten. There was no tea, sugar, salt, tobacco. Team bullocks were killed for food.

The poles had been erected for 240 weary miles from Port Darwin and 120 miles of poles wired as far as Yam Creek, when the rebellious gangs threw down their tools. They had had enough. For $2.50 per week the men had toiled from sunrise to sunset clearing 240 miles of line in
four months under the worst possible conditions. Theirs was the first labour strike in the Northern Territory. Forty men were left camping at the Katherine for many weeks during the wet season. They existed on stewed kangaroo.

With the cessation of work, William McMinn, Government Overseer in the North, sailed in the schooner "Gulnare" around the continent to Adelaide with the bad news.

Darwent and Dalwood’s contract was cancelled, though by then it was May, 1871, and the Wet was over. With many rainless months ahead, the contractors could have got their wagons rolling again and pressed on with the work.

FIVE MONTHS TO COMPLETE LINE

Instead, the South Australian Government took over construction in the North. Only five months were left in which to complete the line to meet the cable creeping southward along the bed of the Timor Sea from Banjowanji in Java to Port Darwin.

In ships bearing the historic names of "Investigator" and "Endeavour", the cable reached Port Darwin on 20 November, 1871.

South Australia’s agreement to complete the land line to meet the cable would soon expire. Time was vital. The whole tremendous scheme was in jeopardy. The Queensland press was crowing that that Colony’s land line to the Gulf of Carpentaria would be completed well ahead of "our South Australian rivals”.

Four months of the dry season in North Australia had now been wasted, with no construction work in the North but down in the Centre work was proceeding well. By August, the northern and southern ends were some 600 miles apart; the Government-built line was across the McDonnell Ranges and was deep in the mulga scrub towards Titree Well. The difficult work of the surveyors in keeping a straight line for the procession of poles from one natural water supply to another and avoiding geographical obstacles for some two thousand miles across an unpeopled land cannot be fully realised today.

During the construction stoppage in the North, overseer Richard C. Burton had built telegraph stations at Southport, Adelaide River, and Yam Creek. A chain of telegraph repeater stations was necessary so that messages could be transmitted by hand, with a Morse key, from one section to the next, mechanical or electric repeaters then not being in use.
Assistant-Engineer R. C. Patterson was sent north from Adelaide to save the line. He sailed from Melbourne in August, 1871, with a fleet. He travelled in the tiny steamer, "Omeo", followed by the sailing vessels "Himalaya", "Golden Fleece", "Laju", and "Antipodes" with one hundred men, 170 horses and 500 team bullocks. It was a long voyage east-about through Torres Strait.

They reached Port Darwin in the blistering heat of the dry season and the wagons streamed inland along Darwent and Dalwood's abandoned line, at the bullock-power pace of three miles per hour.

All the way from Pine Creek to the Katherine in the boulder-covered hills of the Fergusson and Driffield, lay wreckage and abandoned equipment like that of a defeated army. The country was burned bare by bushfires and there was no grass for horses or bullocks. There were long waterless stages. A third of the bullocks died, and horses collapsed from the unaccustomed heat.

THE WET SETS IN

Then suddenly the Wet set in with a vengeance. Thirty-eight inches of rain fell south of the Katherine in December and January.

Engineer Patterson learned the hard way. He could sympathise with Darwent and Dalwood now. Where his horses and bullocks had died of starvation and thirst a few weeks before, they now drowned in the flooded rivers, or bogged so badly they had to be shot.

Some of the men, soaked to the skin for two or three weeks in makeshift camps, went down with fever. Food ran out and there were insufficient medicines.

The barque "Bengal" sailed for the Roper River in January, 1872, with additional stores and equipment, but as the river was in high flood and the ship had to depend on sails, it could get only a few miles upstream. Six years before the great Roper River—discovered by Ludwig Leichhardt on 19 October, 1845, and named after one of his party—had been navigated for the first time by Captain Cadell, the famous Murray River mariner, in the paddle steamer, "Eagle".

Patterson's starving men, anxiously waiting for the "Bengal" at the head of possible navigation, a natural rock bar called Leichhardt's Bar, realising that the ship could not reach them, made a crazy boat out of a wagon-tray covered with tarpaulins and climbing aboard, they whirled
down the flooded river for fifty miles, using saplings to
guide it.

Loaded with life-saving stores, it was a long exhausting
pull upstream against the dangerous flood-strengthened cur-
rent. The lower reaches of the river were alive with huge
crocodiles.

Patterson made a desperate ride on horseback 370 miles
from Port Darwin to Leichhardt's Bar, dragging his horses
out of bogs and swimming flooded rivers while the Northern
monsoon poured down relentlessly.

He struggled on night and day without resting himself
or his horses. The fate of the Overland Telegraph depended
upon his getting a message to Adelaide for help. Few people
nowadays realise the hardships that were endured all over the
world throughout the ages because of the absence of one
thing in such common use during the last fifty years—wireless
communication.

At Leichhardt’s Bar on the Roper River the only boat
was a frail little sailing skiff. Patterson boarded it with
two men and the little craft raced down on the roaring
flood, missing hitting floating trees and lurking crocodiles by
a hair’s breadth several times. It was a 400 mile voyage
down the wild river and out across the cyclone-lashed seas
of the Gulf of Carpentaria to Normanton in Queensland.

By means of Queensland’s telegraph line, just opened to
Normanton, Adelaide received Patterson’s urgent call for
help to prevent complete disaster for South Australia’s dream.

TENACITY AND COURAGE

About Christmas time, 1871, Richard Knuckey was strug­
gling northward on horseback through miles of bog and
flooded country, surveying a route from Attack Creek (fifty
miles north of Tennant Creek) to the vicinity of the present
Mataranka township. Sturt Plain was under six feet of
water.

With no food, not even flour, and living on only what
they could shoot, Knuckey and his men came to Elsey Creek
(of “We of the Never-Never” fame later) and found it over
a quarter of a mile wide. They crossed on a raft they made
out of pandanus trunks. Three horses were drowned during
the nightmare trip. Warlock Ponds were, incidentally,
named after Knuckey’s favourite horse.

At a camp at Red Lily Lagoon down the Roper, men
who had tried to go to meet the “Bengal” were literally
starving, marooned for ten weeks by floodwaters. Others
were marooned at a place aptly named Providence Knoll, between Katherine and Mataranka, living on flour and water.

The wet season of 1871 had broken the contractors in the northern section of the Overland Telegraph, and the Wet of 1872 almost brought disaster upon the Government parties who had replaced them.

When Charles Todd received Patterson's desperate plea for aid and reinforcements, he immediately sailed from Adelaide in the stout little "Omeo" with eighty horses and stores. It was a terrible voyage with animals around Queensland and Torres Strait in the teeth of a cyclone.

The sailing ship "Tararua" followed with straining sails and bending masts with another eighty horses battened below decks.

Then came the paddle-wheeler, "Young Australia", her paddles thrashing through storm-lashed seas—all bound for the Roper River. Later, she was to leave her remains on a Roper sandbar.

The three vessels successfully navigated the flood-swollen river and landed horses and stores at Leichhardt Bar, some 60 miles upstream. The depot had been surrounded for weeks by five miles of floodwaters, deep as a horse's shoulder. Now, 50 packhorses were sent floundering through the flood and bog as far south as Daly Waters to save the construction gangs from utter starvation.

**THE LINE CRAWLS SOUTH TO DALY WATERS**

When the wet season eased off in late March south of the Katherine, wagon wheels were turning again, axes were cutting a swathe through the coolibahs and bulwaddy and the line of poles carrying a single galvanised wire were sent crawling south to Daly Waters. For nearly 300 miles south from Darwin, the spear grass stood taller than a man on horseback.

Meanwhile, down in the Centre, gangs had been toiling on in scorching heat without shade and in the freezing cold of the Inland winter, sinking twenty four-foot post-holes to the mile, sometimes dynamiting in solid rock.

The men were tormented by hordes of flies and plagued by the raids of Aborigines stealing tools, insulators, and wire. The two latter made excellent spearheads when fashioned to needle points by skilled Stone Age craftsmen.

Telegraph stations, each built like a stone fort with loopholes for rifles to fight off hostile tribesmen who still ruled the wilderness to the east and west, were erected at Charlotte Waters (on the South Australian border), at Alice

(Photo by Courtesy S.A. Public Library)

Tennant Creek Telegraph Station Buildings, 100 years old, are still standing and occupied as a private homestead.

OVERLAND TELEGRAPH STATION, ALICE SPRINGS, N.T.
This historic telegraph station was built in 1872 on the site of the original Alice Springs. The buildings were fortified against attack by hostile aborigines and are in the form of a square.

(Photo by Courtesy S.A. Public Library)
Springs, Barrow Creek, Tennant Creek, Powell Creek, Daly Waters, and Katherine—buildings that would remain outposts for the next seventy years, until the Pacific War, sheltering four or five lonely men—telegraph operators and linemen—whose only communication with the outside world was the Morse key and the telegraph wire.

Concerning the Alice Springs telegraph station, Mrs. A. V. Purvis writes: “By 1872 a combined telegraph office and staff quarters, a stable and wagon shed, and a police hut on the bank of the waterhole had already been built of stone. A separate telegraph office, telegraph master’s house, battery storage room and a small keeping cellar near the stables were built soon afterwards. In common with some of the other stations on the line, the main building (the staff quarters) was fortified against attack from hostile Aborigines. Three wings formed three sides of a square, the fourth side having a high wall and gate. Windows faced the courtyard and the outside walls had gun loopholes . . . With the exception of the police hut and the cellar, all the stone buildings mentioned are still standing. Traces of other outbuildings also exist. The Alice Springs repeater station worked south to Charlotte Waters and north to Barrow Creek. It continued in use until 1932, when the present post office was opened in town . . .”

**ALICE SPRINGS A LONELY OUTPOST**

What a lonely outpost was Alice Springs in the “seventies!” It was one thousand miles south of Darwin and nine hundred miles north of Adelaide.

The first overlanders from the south came up along the telegraph line. They were pioneer sheep men named Ralph and John Milner.

Unlike travellers of today who follow the Stuart Highway over part of the same route in cars and trucks in a matter of hours, it took the Milner Bros. fourteen months to ride from Port Augusta to the Roper River, tailing some 3,000 sheep. On the way, they fought the wild blacks and John Milner lost his life.

The Milners left Port Augusta with 4,300 sheep, 160 horses, and two bullock wagons in September, 1870. They reached the last outpost, Tennant Creek telegraph station, in mid-1871.

Here they found the Warramunga tribesmen as fierce as had Stuart ten years before. John Milner was clubbed to death in the camp at Attack Creek, and lies there in a forgotten grave.
Ralph Milner pushed on and reached the construction camps on the Roper with the surviving 3,000 sheep. No doubt the hardy workmen found mutton a welcome change of diet.

THE "PONY EXPRESS"

It was June, 1872. Time had run out. The submarine cable from England flashed the first messages from London to Port Darwin, one of the world’s loneliest outposts. But the landline was incomplete.

Suddenly the cable broke, and this gave the O.T. men breathing space. They worked like demons to span the gap between north and south with poles and a single wire. The northern and southern sections were still nearly three hundred miles apart.

The Pony Express of the American Wild West is famous but few people have heard of the “pony express” of Australia’s “Wild North!”

John Lewis, a colourful South Australian cattleman and expert bushman, was engaged to organise such a service in the Northern Territory.

By means of a few fearless, hard-riding horsemen who bridged the 300 mile gap in five days, Adelaide and Sydney received their first cablegrams from Europe. That they carried their lives in their hands there is no doubt.

For instance, on 9 July, 1872, John Lewis and his young brother Jim, started from Tennant Creek with cables for England with two packhorses. Travelling at a fast trot they reached Attack Creek, 45 miles, by evening.

ABORIGINES ATTACK

Some telegraph men were camped there. They reported the Aborigines had come up close to their camp, apparently unarmed. Suddenly they had produced spears which they had been trailing with their toes, and hurled them at the white men. They were only stopped by a volley of rifle fire at close range.

The “Pony Express” riders urged their tired horses on through the darkness to the Morphett. Here, John Lewis kept watch the rest of the night, a revolver in each hand, expecting the waiting Warramunga to attack at any moment. But nothing happened.

Before dawn, the Lewis Bros. were again in their saddles and loping onwards, guided by the stars in a cloudless winter sky in that wild and lonely land. They reached Burton’s camp at Renner Springs, 120 miles north, by sunset that day.

So the “Pony Express” riders raced on—to Lawson Creek
where Richard Knuckey and Christie Bagot told their eager listeners all the news from further north; on to Newcastle Waters where John Lewis had his first sleep for four nights, then to McGorrerey’s Ponds—all Stuart’s namings—where he met Rutt of the northern construction party.

With horses staggering from exhaustion Lewis pressed on to Milner’s Ponds where the London-bound cables from Adelaide were handed over to be transmitted to Port Darwin by Andrew Howley, operator in charge at the end of the telegraph.

Lewis had a few hours rest, then he galloped back southward on a fresh horse to meet Ray Boucaut at the Lawson where northern and southern despatches were exchanged.

The “Pony Express” riders of the Northern Territory were heroes, forgotten today like so many other fearless men of Australia’s colourful frontier days.

In laconic language, John Lewis described one incident in his reminiscences, “Fought and Won”:

“... The next night, Hands and I camped at Milner’s Lagoon. After having our quartpot of tea and some ‘bully’ and damper, we lay down on a blanket to rest. I struck a match to light my pipe, and I heard something drop out of a tree above my head. I guessed what it was but did not say anything. Hands had already fallen sleep and after finishing my pipe, I did likewise.

“At daylight we found that the natives had been perched in the trees all around us. In striking the match, I had frightened them, and they made off. Judging by their tracks there must have been forty of them, and I daresay they were armed”.

SUCCESS AT LAST

Day by day the distance between the two ends of the wire shortened. Each day the rides of the “Pony Express” riders shortened until finally on Thursday, 22 August, 1872, the telegraph wires were joined at a lonely spot hemmed in by dense lancewood scrub, four hundred miles south of Darwin.

One of the greatest projects of Australia’s pioneering days had been brought to a successful conclusion at a cost of great hardship by courageous workers, bushmen, horsemen, and technicians.

In this isolated spot, 1,600 miles from Adelaide, Engineer R. C. Patterson tapped out his message in Morse when the wires were joined that great day nearly ninety-nine years ago. John Lewis described the scene:
On 22 August, I went with Patterson and Mitchell to a point a few miles east of Frew's Ironstone Ponds, where the two ends of the wire were to be joined, connecting Adelaide with Port Darwin.

"We met Will Harvey who told us the wires would not be joined until 12 o'clock, so we returned to camp, then made for the last join and arrived there at about 12 o'clock.

"At ten minutes past twelve on 22 August, 1872, the wires were really joined. Twenty-one shots were fired from our Colt revolvers, and a bottle of supposed brandy was broken over the last post (I think it was cold tea).

"Among those present were Messrs. Patterson, Rutt, Mitchell, Howley, Ricks, Hands, Bayfield, Hack, and myself. It had long been a desire of mine to see the wire connected between South and North . . . ."

Australia had achieved its first modern communication with the outside world. To the people of nearly a century ago it was a great marvel that messages could be flashed across the world by wire in a matter of hours. Hitherto it had taken anything from four to eight months for news to reach Australia from England by sailing ship. Radio and planes were yet forty-five years in the future.

In 1954, the P.M.G. Department erected a fine marble column by the side of the Stuart Highway about a mile east of Frew's Ironstone Ponds between Elliott and Dunmara. The inscription reads:

The Overland Telegraph Line. This column was erected to the memory of Sir Charles Todd, K.C.M.G., M.A., F.R.S., F.R.A.S., F.S.T.E., Postmaster-General of the Province of South Australia. His gallant construction teams, operators, and linesmen under R. C. Patterson, A. T. Woods, W. H. Abbott, B. H. Babbage, R. C. Burton, W. Harvey, R. R. Knuckey, G. McLachlan, G. R. McMinn, W. W. Mills, A. J. Mitchell, W. Rutt, and explorer John Ross. The north and south parts of this epic O.T. Line were finally joined about one mile west of this spot, at 3.15 p.m. on Thursday, August 22, 1872, thus making possible for the first time instantaneous telegraphic communication between Australia and Great Britain. *Finis Coronat Opus.*

Great must have been the rejoicing that day in Adelaide long ago when Patterson's message came out of the hitherto silent North—a Northland incredibly lonely still but inarticulate no longer, thanks to those courageous men who had made the Overland Telegraph a reality by dint of perseverance and great hardship.
The monetary cost was three times the original estimate, or £338,000 ($676,000). In the first week 152 cables were sent and 148 received, the charge then being $18.75 for twenty words.

**ADDITIONAL WORK**

The great enterprise was finished but had yet to be improved. The notorious white ants (termites) of the northern part of the Territory found the telegraph poles tasty, and all but the cypresses fell before their onslaught within a year.

In 1873, 300 miles of wooden poles were replaced by iron poles carted by horse teams from the Roper Bar. This in itself was no mean feat.

Eighty years after they were erected, some of the cypress pine poles were put through a sawmill in Darwin and
emerged as perfectly sound building timber. In 1953 I saw one of Darwent and Dalwood’s poles in the backyard of the Pine Creek post office. Now, since Northern Territory people have realised the need to preserve historical relics, one of the original poles, complete with insulator, is displayed in the rooms of the N.T. Historical Society in Darwin.

In 1900, a copper wire was added to the single galvanised wire, and the “O.T.” as it was affectionately known to the pioneers, remained the same until World War II altered the old ways with the introduction of the telephone, and the radio-telephone.

Mrs. A. V. Purvis writes: “... The line originally approached Alice Springs along the Hugh River, past Owen Springs and along Jay Creek, until it cut across almost directly eastward, passing the foot of Mt. Gillen. Towards the end of the century the line was moved to the direct route through Heavitree Gap. Mt. Gillen, a commanding feature of the Alice Springs landscape, perpetuates the name of Francis James Gillen, who became an operator on the Overland Telegraph Line in 1875 and was promoted to Post and Telegraph Master at Alice Springs in 1892. He co-operated with Professor W. Baldwin Spencer in various studies of the Arunta natives . . .

“In 1888, the South Australian Government, spurred on by recurring ambitions to build a railway across the centre of the continent, sent survey parties to fix sites for suitable railheads. It was in this way that, two miles down the Todd watercourse from the Telegraph Station, on the nearest convenient flat country, the township named Stuart (now called Alice Springs) was mapped out and gazetted on 15 October, 1889. Land sales were held in Adelaide in 1889, but the new town developed slowly. The Arltunga ruby field in 1885, which became a goldfield, 60 miles east, in 1887, helped it only slightly. As long as the railway remained unbuilt the transport of supplies from Port Augusta continued to be extremely expensive and was mainly by camel teams . . .” The railway from Adelaide did not reach Alice Springs until 1929, the same year the line from Darwin reached Birdum. A gap of 600 miles has remained ever since.

**PIONEERS’ LIFELINE**

The first important news from the North that the telegraph wire carried caused a sensation in the outside world. It was the magic word, “Gold”.

In 1871, Alfred Giles, who was then with John Ross,
found traces of gold at the Cullen River, just south of Pine Creek. Surveyor George McLachlan had also found alluvial gold at Pine Creek in the middle of the same year. Then in July, 1872, when the telegraph line was not quite joined, Harry Roberts, a member of the Bagot-Chambers Prospecting Expedition, uncovered a rich reef of gold at Grove Hill. The Overland Telegraph had been build over a reef of gold!

By the time the wires were joined, the gold rush was on. The magic words hummed over the wire across the continent, tapped out in Morse. Every ship out of Adelaide was soon bound for the North.

Queensland was having her great gold rushes at this period, but no gold had been found in South Australia or Western Australia. The news caused a sensation, and sensations followed one another as news of more fabulous discoveries were telegraphed from the North.

J. A. G. Little who was with Patterson, became Darwin's first postmaster. The first post office was built of saplings and bark. The old stone post office built in 1886, and the stone offices and quarters of the British-Australia Telegraph Company, built in 1872 and known as the cable office, were all destroyed in the Japanese air raid on Darwin on 19 February, 1942. Thirteen men and women of the post office and telephone and telegraphic staff died, with 270 others, on that terrible day when the first enemy bombs fell on Australian soil. No other town in Australia suffered so much from enemy action as Darwin which endured some seventy air raids during World War II.

In the early days of Darwin, the B.A.T. offices, as they were called, were the focal point of its social life, the gay young Englishmen there sponsoring dances and concerts night after night to revel away loneliness and boredom. In 1872 there were 650 white men and women in Port Darwin. For a brief period in the madness of the Pine Creek gold rush, it swelled to over 7,000, to drop again to a few hundred.*

**VITAL ROLE IN SETTLEMENT**

The Overland Telegraph played a vital role in the settling of North Australia. It spanned an uninhabited land and throughout long lonely years it was Darwin's only link and comfort, bridging the weeks of waiting between ships.

The O.T. was a veritable lifeline for the pioneers of the Territory. Many a starving man or one dying of thirst was able to crawl to the line and was rescued by patrolling lines-

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* The December 1970 population of the city of Darwin was 33,000, estimated to be increasing at a steady 12 per cent per annum.
men. The linesmen lived perilous and lonely lives at the fortified telegraph stations each about 150 miles apart. The maintenance of the line across the wilderness was no job for faint hearts.

The linesmen stationed at Daly Waters had to ride about 200 miles to Leichhardt Bar to collect their stores landed there once in six months by schooner.

In 1875, the Aborigines attacked C. H. Johnson and his men, Rickards and Daer in their camp near the Roper River. Johnson was killed outright and the other two men were badly wounded. They helped one another back to Daly Waters but Daer died soon after arrival.

On the evening of 23 February, 1874, the Warramunga descended upon the Barrow Creek telegraph station and took the staff unawares outside its protective stockade. Stapleton, the superintendent, and Franks, a linesman, fell under the hail of spears, and only E. Flint, who was badly wounded, gained the safety of the fort-like outpost. Fainting from loss of blood he notified Tennant Creek and Alice Springs, each about 150 miles north and south, of the Aboriginal attack, by Morse code message over the wire. Soon, parties of well-armed horsemen were galloping north and south to the relief of Barrow Creek. Flint died in 1883 and is buried in the little cemetery at the old Alice Springs Telegraph Station which has recently been restored as a museum by the Northern Territory Trust.

CATTLE TREK ENDS IN TRAGEDY

William Nation, who had been exploring in Cape York Peninsula with William Hann, left Maryvale Station, Charters Towers, in September 1873, with 500 head of cattle for the Pine Creek goldfields. The venture ended in tragedy. Cattle were speared by the blacks, west of Burketown, and the drovers became ill with fever; they quarrelled and deserted. Abandoning the cattle, Nation and Leonard Elvoy made for the nearest outpost, Daly Waters telegraph station, 200 miles away.

They had to fight off the natives who followed them as they floundered through the flooded country, and Nation went down with fever. Elvoy struggled on to Daly Waters for help, and told Richard Randall Knuckey the terrible story. Knuckey rode out 150 miles and found and buried all that the dingoes had left of William Nation. It was then 12 June, 1874.

East and west of the Overland Telegraph, the country was almost unknown. The telegraph stations were bases from
which exploring parties set out. Permain and Borrodaile, African explorers, who set out from Yam Creek telegraph station in 1874, disappeared without trace. Phillip Saunders and Adam Johns steered by compass and bushmanship for 1500 trackless miles from Roebourne in Western Australia, across the Kimberley country where no white men had been before, across the mighty Ord and the Victoria Rivers, and through the lancewood scrubs that had baffled Stuart, their goal the lonely telegraph station at Daly Waters. These great prospector-explorers were to discover the fabulously rich Union Reef at Pine Creek.

**FORREST'S EXPEDITION**

The Western Australian explorer, Alexander Forrest, followed much the same route as Saunders and Johns, but it is Forrest who has been honoured as the discoverer of the Fitzroy, Ord, and other important rivers and pastoral country which led to the opening up of North-west Australia. But for the existence of the Overland Telegraph Line, however, Forrest and his entire expedition would have probably perished.

His men were ill, their rations were gone and their horses exhausted when Forrest reached the Victoria River on 18 August, 1879. Taking with him a man named Hicks, Forrest made for the nearest point of succour, the Overland Telegraph Line, 250 miles eastward.

With no food other than a snake and the stringy flesh of a few kite-hawks, and with no water left, the two wanderers staggered through the silent wilderness in the increasing heat of early summer. At last the line of poles came in sight and they raised a feeble cheer. A small tank of water left by the linesmen saved their lives.

Forrest followed the line for four days before he came to the fortified stone building of the Daly Waters telegraph station. The linesmen provided food and fresh horses, and Forrest immediately rode back to the Victoria to rescue his men, arriving just in time. The expedition reached Darwin on 7 October, 1879.

Alfred Giles, who had been with John Ross, was the man in charge of a mob of sheep with which an English millionaire, Dr. W. B. Browne, intended to stock Newcastle Waters, Delamere and Springvale—an experiment doomed to failure as this is essentially cattle country.

For more than twelve months, the flock of sheep crept northward up the Overland Telegraph Line from Port Augusta for 1,800 miles. Alfred Giles settled at Springvale, near
Katherine telegraph station, as Dr. Browne's manager. The homestead, one of the first pastoral homes in the Territory, built of hand-cut stone, still stands.

At Katherine, a township grew up around the telegraph station. Billy O'Donnell's exploring expedition set out from there in 1883 for the Kimberleys. In 1884, survivors of Stockdale's expedition reached the Katherine from Northwest Australia, more dead than alive. When gold was found at Halls Creek in 1886, Katherine became a busy outpost on the long dangerous track the goldseekers followed from Queensland, from Burketown to the Roper River then westward to Halls Creek.*

PIONEERS HONOURED

The pathfinders of the Overland Telegraph and the pioneers who followed them, especially those in Central Australia, may have been entirely forgotten but for research undertaken over a period of almost forty years by Mrs. A. V. Purvis, F.R.G.S.A., of Alice Springs and who, some 15 years ago, initiated the erection of a unique and fitting memorial in Alice Springs, unveiled in September, 1957. The memorial represents one hundred years of exploration and pioneering in that vague geographical area known as Central Australia.

John Ross, the explorer history forgot, was the first white man to penetrate the unknown wilderness of the Centre from the settled areas of South Australia when he discovered the life-saving Macumba Waterhole north-westwards of Lake Eyre in the summer of 1857-58. He stocked his discovery with starving sheep during the great "sixties' drought" as it became known in the far north of South Australia.

The memorial is not a mere cairn—it is a shrine-like edifice of stone and concrete with a drinking fountain in the centre. A horseshoe-shaped roof is supported by pillars and there are numerous inlaid plaques. The stonework of the fountain was executed by Andrew Allen of Aberdeen, Scotland, the port from which John Ross sailed for Australia in 1836. The memorial itself was built by Mr. Jim Sweet, veteran master builder of Central Australia. There are plaques to the first Lutheran missionaries of Coopers Creek and Hermannsburg, a plaque to the linesmen and station masters of the Overland Telegraph, and many name plaques to otherwise forgotten pioneer pastoralists of the area.

The horses and bullocks that made the construction of

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* Katherine is now an important agricultural and pastoral town with a large meatworks and a population of approximately 3,000.
the Overland Telegraph possible are also commemorated. There is a plaque to "The Beasts of Burden". It was probably the first time in Australia that dumb animals were acknowledged for their part in the taming of this continent. It is in the form of a horseshoe, mainly subscribed for by the staff of the P.M.G. Department in Adelaide, and reads:

"THIS HORSESHOE IS DEDICATED TO THE BEASTS OF BURDEN, FAITHFUL FRIENDS OF THE PIONEERS".

The principal plaque reads:

"To John Ross, Members of the Overland Telegraph Line Exploration and Construction Parties, 1870-72, and all Pioneers of Central Australia, 1870-1920".

The memorial ensures that John Ross and the other pioneers of his day will be forever remembered and take their rightful place in Australian history. In a lifetime of pioneering that is hard to equal, John Ross made nineteen separate expeditions by horse and camel, apart from the Overland Telegraph pathfinding, exploring the mountains and deserts of the Inland.

CENTENARY OF ALICE SPRINGS

In March, 1971, the town of Alice Springs celebrated its centenary. Mrs. Purvis was one of many who was disappointed that Mills, and not Ross, was incorrectly given credit for the discovery of the Alice Spring(s) waterhole; 18 March was the date that should have been chosen for the centenary, not 11 March, as explained earlier in this paper.

Mrs. Purvis recently informed me that "on 18 March last, after all the main celebrations for the centenary were over, a party of historically-minded people, including citizens of the town of Alice Springs, visitors, teachers, and students of all ages, made a motor journey to the near-spot where the Mills and Ross exploring parties met, 100 years before, and have recommended that the site be marked by a substantial indicator, with suitable wording".

However, something which Mrs. Purvis and her helpers had been working for for many years came to fruition during the centenary—a fine memorial fountain was unveiled in this bustling tourists' Mecca of Central Australia to honour the surveyors and constructors of the Overland Telegraph Line, 1870-72. No one will now visit Alice Springs without learning a little of that great achievement of a century ago, and the gallant men connected with it will be forgotten no longer.
MEMORIALS AT DARWIN

In Darwin, there are three plaques connected with the Overseas cable, the Overland Telegraph, and the Post Office.

On the clifftop overlooking the lovely blue waters of the harbour, close to the Northern Territory Administration offices, is a cairn composed of blocks of honey-coloured hand-cut stone from the bombed-out ruin of the historic cable station that once stood nearby. The plaque reads:

“This Cairn was Erected by the Overseas Telecommunications Commission (Aust) to Commemorate the Landing, some 63 yards Southwest of this point, of the Submarine Cable which, in 1871, provided the first means of Telegraph Communication between Australia and other Countries.

“The cable, laid by the British-Australian Telegraph Company, linked Australia through Java with the cables of the British-India Extension Company. The first message from Port Darwin to London was transmitted on 20th November, 1871.

“Completion of the Overland Telegraph Line on 22 August, 1872, extended the International Cable Link to the Southern Colonies.

“In 1902, the Darwin cable was supplemented by cable outlets in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans and was eventually superseded by these routes. It was taken out of service in 1938 and finally abandoned in 1950.

“This Cairn is built of stone from the first permanent Cable Station in Darwin, built in 1872. Unveiled 1959 by J. C. Archer Esq. N.T.Admin”.

A few yards away, in the entrance to the Members' Gallery of the Northern Territory Legislative Council, this plaque is set into a wall, also of old hand-cut stone:

“This portion of the wall, left in its original state, is all that remains of the Darwin Telegraph Station built in 1872 when the Overland Telegraph Line was opened. The building was destroyed in an enemy air raid on the 19th February, 1942, when ten officers of the Australian Post Office lost their lives very close to this spot”.

MAP IN BAS-RELIEF

In the foyer of Darwin’s very modern air-conditioned Post Office in the heart of this most Northerly city in Australia, is a map in bas-relief showing the town of Darwin in 1942 and an outline of the old Post Office in black marble with a white marble seat for the convenience of present Post Office patrons. The large bronze plaque reads:
"By subscription of Post Office staffs throughout the Commonwealth, this Memorial Entrance has been created to the Memory of:


"Officers of the Postal Department who, in the course of duty, lost their lives on the 19th February 1942 during an Air Raid on Darwin town when the Post Office was destroyed.

"This Memorial unveiled on 13 July 1961 by Hon. C. W. Davidson, Postmaster-General. M. R. C. Stradwick Esq., Director-General Posts and Telegraphs".

On the opposite corner of the Smith and Knuckey Streets intersection, across from the Darwin Post Office, is a small park called the John McDouall Stuart Memorial Gardens, in which there is a plaque commemorating the fact that Stuart was the first to reach the Northern coast, 120 miles east from the later site of Darwin, in July 1862. But for Stuart's successful journey there would probably not have been any Adelaide to Darwin Overland Telegraph Line, and the cable from England may have come ashore at Normanton, North Queensland, instead.

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My grateful thanks go to Mrs. A. V. Purvis, F.R.G.S.A. (Qld. Branch 1948), for assistance given and for permission to quote from her manuscripts.

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