The Historical Society of the Northern Territory’s Field Trip to Newcastle Waters Station, Longreach Waterhole and Powell Creek Overland Telegraph Station

Thursday 22 – Sunday 25 July 2010

By Bev Phelts

Our down-the-track-trip was quite adventurous considering most of it was on the bitumen.

With the plan to muster at Warlock Ponds, 437 kms south of Darwin on Friday, my group of four decided to set off a day earlier and spend the night in Katherine. We arrived at nightfall so only had time to top up the tank, recheck our supplies, eat tea and get an early night.

The following day, our intrepid group of fourteen, met for morning billy tea at Warlock Ponds. Over a cuppa, we caught up with members and meet some new people who had joined our trip. On our way to Longreach Waterhole, we diverted off the Stuart Highway now and then to look at historical sites.

The first site was the Gorrie Airstrip located 10km from Larrimah. This is one of Australia’s largest dirt airstrips and it supported the largest Army base during World War II. The Airstrip was named after a flying officer who was killed in action near Menado, Dutch East Indies in 1942. Another stop was to see the monument dedicated to Alexander Forrest who with his party, had set out from WA and explored the area. They were suffering severely from thirst but were saved when they killed a bird and drank its blood. Overland Telegraph workmen found them and brought them to safety.

When we arrived at Daly Waters the place was buzzing with the large number of grey nomads and their campervans. Obviously business was booming for Daly Waters as the “Singing Chook Man” who was usually based at the Pub had now set up his own business across the road.
In 1862, John McDouall Stuart passed through here and named the area Daly Waters in honour of Dominic Daly who was the Governor of SA at the time. The telegraph line followed in 1872 and the pony express operated through Daly Waters. The pony express ran between the north and south ends of the line. Bill and Henrietta Pearce, local tin miners built a store in 1930 to service travelers and later air passengers en route to London. The store acquired an alcohol licence in 1928 and it became a local feeding, drinking and accommodation place for the Army, locals and travelers.

After inspecting Stuart’s inscribed “S” on a tree trunk nearby, we decided to go somewhere much quieter for lunch, and set ourselves up inside the Daly Waters Airport Hanger. The complex consists of a hangar which was constructed in 1930, a shell oil store, accommodation, radio and navigational buildings which are heritage listed. The Airport was the first international Airport in Australia prior to World War II. Planes on their way to London would refuel at the site and passengers would be provided with food and overnight accommodation. During the War, it played a significant part in the defence of the Northern coastline. Both American and Australian air forces were based there which included Mitchell Bombers, Kitty Hawks and fighter squadrons.
After lunch, we headed directly to Newcastle Waters Station to let the manager know that we had arrived. Newcastle Waters is located about 700kms south of Darwin and was named by Stuart after the Duke of Newcastle. An Overland Telegraph Station was constructed there in 1870 and the first pastoral lease was taken up during the early 1880s.

Famous stockmen who were connected with Newcastle Waters Station were D’Arcy Uhr, Nat Buchanan and Pic Willets. Ross and Keith Smith refueled at the Station on their incredible flight from England to Australia in 1919. Later in 1935, the Qantas Empire Air Service was landing at the Station to deliver mail and refuel. In 1930, a small portion of the station was sectioned off to build a township and those buildings are now heritage listed. The stop at the Station gave us the opportunity to look through some of the buildings.
After a brief stop at Elliot Store to top up with fuel and ice we made our way to Longreach Waterhole. The Waterhole was almost deserted by humans and we found a fabulous large area to camp on the waters edge. The Waterhole was brimming with water and on dusk, scores of brolgas, pelicans, black whistler ducks, egrets, little black cormorants swarmed the wetland. We watched as these birds continually moved up and down the billabong following the schools of fish. On land, the bush was filled with cheeky finches and a variety of other birds. Sunset saw a beautiful orange haze shimmer across the billabong and later that evening, the full moon's reflection on the water reminded us of Broome’s “stairway to heaven”.

Around the campfire Barry Leithhead and Robyn McIntyre talked about the research they have been undertaking on Robyn’s father, Dr Cecil Cook. The group was interested to hear about a little unknown side of Cook’s life - his training in England, his work on tropical diseases and his achievements in the Northern Territory.

The Pelicans at Longreach Waterhole
Photographs courtesy Judy Boland

Our camp
Judy Boland and brother, Michael Smith

Arthur Keat & Lyn Reid
The following morning offered another spectacular display of birdlife as we ate our breakfast. That morning, we headed south of Elliot to the Powell Creek Overland Telegraph Station which is listed on the Register of the National Estate. The site has been used off and on since 1872 until 1960 so there are several archeology overlays representing different periods of occupation. The Powell Creek Station was one of 11 repeater stations that were built along the Overland Telegraph Line to service faults and to relay morse code signals. Regrettably, the Station is only one of four stations remaining in the Northern Territory. There was quiet a lot to investigate at this site and we lunched and stayed here until the early afternoon. The site contained the Station, stone and tin accommodation for stockmen/staff, 3 water squatter tanks, an old stone well and the remains of a mechanical workshop and outstation. There were numerous crockery, glass, stone and tool remnants. What was surprising was the high number of Oppenheimer poles still standing. Oppenheimer poles are metal poles which were use to replace the wooden poles. The Oppenheimer poles must have been so numerous that they had been cut into short lengths and used for fencing. Our intrepid archeologist, Julie Mastin and keen “assistant”, Penny Baird decided to spend the morning following the original in situ Oppenheimer poles. They were pleased to count approximately 20 at roughly 40 metres apart. This is the only site believed to hold such a large number in situ.

Over dinner that night we were pleased to be treated again to another amazing spectacle of bird life without a crocodile in sight! Around the campfire, topics of conversation ranged from ghost stories and min min lights to getting lost in the bush. We were also in agreement in writing to the National Trust regarding our observations and lending our support to the protection and preservation of the Powell Creek OLT site. The evening ended with another brilliant moon light display.
Sunday morning was time to leave with some of us going directly back to Darwin and others much more leisurely. Our journey home took in Charles Todd’s Memorial. Todd was the SA Post Office General and the man responsible for the construction of the Adelaide to Darwin Overland Telegraph Line. The *We of the Never Never* graves at Elsey Station and the original homesite of Jeannie and Agneas Gunn. The Mataranka thermal springs and the site of the movie and its replica homestead, *We of the Never Never*.

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<th>Those who joined the trip:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Brian and Lyn Reid</td>
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<td>Sheryl and Arthur Keat</td>
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<td>Barry Leithhead &amp; Robyn</td>
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<td>McIntyre</td>
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<td>Judy Boland, Michael Smith,</td>
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<td>Ros Henry, Bev Phelts</td>
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<td>Julie Mastin and Penny Baird</td>
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<td>Earl and Wendy James</td>
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Michael Smith at the replica Elsey Homestead
Photograph courtesy Judy Boland
ELLIOIT - KATHERINE

418 kilometres
National Route 1 & 87
Stuart Highway

CAUTION

Skiying animals present a hazard, particularly if travelling at night. For maximum safety, restrict driving to daylight hours.

ELLIOIT (approx. population 420)

Established during WWII, Elliott was a staging camp for troops heading north.

DAILYウォTERS

Situated approximately 4 kms west of the Stuart Highway, the historic Daily Waters Pub holds the longest continuous liquor license in the Northern Territory, dating back to 1893. The present building was constructed in the late 1920's.

MATARANNA

Located 6 kilometres to the east of the township and set in lush rainforest, is the famous Mataranka thermal pool. With a constant temperature of 34°C the crystal clear pool has delighted bathers for many years. About 21 kms south of Mataranka is the WE OF THE NEVER NEVER CEMETERY which is the burial place of several of the characters mentioned in Jeanne Gunn's popular book.

KATHERINE (approx. population 6,720)

Noted for beef production, mining and horticulture, the town also supports the nearby Tindal RAAF Base. The picturesque Katherine River runs through the town and 20 km upstream passes through the noted tourist attraction, Katherine Gorge. Boat trips may be taken through the gorge with the near vertical cliffs towering above.

ROAD SURFACE

Bitumen.

SM0057 1/03
**TENNANT CREEK**

**- ELLIOTT**

252 kilometres
Stuart Highway

**CAUTION**

1. Beware of flying stones when vehicles, particularly road trains are approaching.
2. Straying animals present a hazard, particularly when travelling at night. For maximum safety restrict driving to daylight hours.

**TENNANT CREEK**

(approx. population 3,860)

Established in conjunction with the Overland Telegraph, the town subsequently became an important mining settlement and was the site of Australia's last major gold rush, in 1933. While gold and copper mining activities continue, Tennant Creek is also considered to be the commercial hub of the Barkly region.

At the junction of the Stuart and Barkly Highways (known as "Threeways") is a monument to the Rev. John Flynn, pioneer explorer and founder of the Royal Flying Doctor Service. The surrounding countryside is semi-arid, lightly vegetated with stunted mulga and saltbush.

**ELLIOTT**

(approx. population 430)

Established during WW11, Elliott was a staging camp for troops heading north.

**POINTS OF INTEREST**

Close to Attack Creek is a monument to JOHN McDONALL STUART. It was here that hostile Aborigines and illness forced Stuart to turn back on 26th June, 1860, from his attempt to traverse the continent.

**COUNTRY TRAVESED**

Flat to undulating, moderately timbered with stony sections.

**ROAD SURFACE**

Bitumen.

**EMERGENCY ROAD SERVICE**

AANT Depot at Tennant Creek and Elliott. Refer to current Road Service List, issued with this itinerary, for Depot localities and phone numbers.

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**RAAM PLUS**

HAVE YOU UPGRADED?