


A NIGHT TO REMEMBER



ANSETTA AUSTRALIA

**Northern Territory Police
Historical Society**
in conjunction with the
Palliative Care Association

102
Presents

A film night screening
"Outback Patrol" and
"The Phantom Stockman"
starring Chips Rafferty
and featuring Bob Darken,
ex-N.T. Police Officer and Pastoralist

Sat 12th August at 7pm
Settlers Function Room Palm Circuit
\$15.00pp
*Includes complimentary drink on arrival & supper
Dress 50's Stockman Style*

A copy of one of the tickets sold for the fundraiser night

A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

by
Garth Macpherson

The fund-raising night on behalf of Palliative Care and dedicated to the memory of the late Bob Darken proved to meet all the expectations the organisers could have hoped for. What started out as a small idea turned into a capacity crowd with assistance from many businesses and individuals that just wanted to help.

The venue was at Settlers Function Rooms on Palm Circuit, commencing at 7pm on Saturday, 12th August 2000. In keeping with the age of the films, "Outback Patrol" (1947) starring Bob Darken and "The Phantom Stockman" (1952) starring Chips Rafferty and also featuring Bob, many people attended in stockman's dress or a style similar to the 50's.

Guests of honour, Vicki Darken and her daughter Sondra were delivered to the venue along with the producer of both films, Mr Lee Robinson in a 1937 Chev. Six mounted horsemen provided the guard of honour.

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THE VIEWS EXPRESSED IN THIS PUBLICATION ARE NOT NECESSARILY
THOSE OF THE POLICE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OR THE ANSETTA AUSTRALIA



Inside the room, where a display of Bob Darken memorabilia was on hand, an old 78 rpm record player was delivering old favourites bearing the Regal Zolaphone label.

A minor hiccup was experienced when the projector had to be replaced. While that was being carried out, the crowd was entertained by two of our local musicians, Ted Egan and Bob Barford. The latter also doubled as master of ceremonies.

The programme was changed slightly to accommodate the unexpected. As well as Ted and Bob stepping in, Ian Builder auctioned off several donated items that included a new novel titled "The Keeper of Dreams" by Peter Shann Ford. The author, Lee Robinson, Vicki and Sondra all signed the book. Another item for auction was a tanned Hereford hide donated by Peter Seidel. The hide came from a Centralian property and of very good quality. It was branded on the evening using the old Simpsons Gap BTV brand and the police broad arrow insignia. BTV is currently the property of Bill and Val Moon of Mount Ringwood near Adelaide River and we are extremely grateful to them for entrusting us with their property for this special night. Thanks also to Neil McDonald of the Police Mounted Section who provided the broad arrow brand. In all, it was an excellent evening with many people lending a hand to ensure its success. All these people (too many here to mention individually) but the man at the centre of it all who spent many hours making his dream become a

reality was Alex Sherrin. He was determined the night would be a success and I know Vicki and Sondra were delighted with the result. We thank them for allowing us to pay homage to their late husband and father in the service of a worthy cause.

At the end of the day, well over \$5,000.00 was raised for Palliative Care. This also included a number of donations from people who were unable to make it but wanted to assist. This has been a classic example of Territorians getting together and making something work. To all those who contributed in some way, thank you very much.

A SINCERE THANKYOU

To all those who extended their hand to help, or offer donations, please accept our many thanks. This night not only paid tribute to a wonderful man, Bob Darkin, but also honoured the presense of a true pioneer of the film industry. Through this great effort and the support of our community it has been made possible to further support a very worthy organisation, Paliative Care. A very special thankyou goes to Alex Sherrin for his inexhaustable effort and enthusiasm, that helped make this night the success it was.



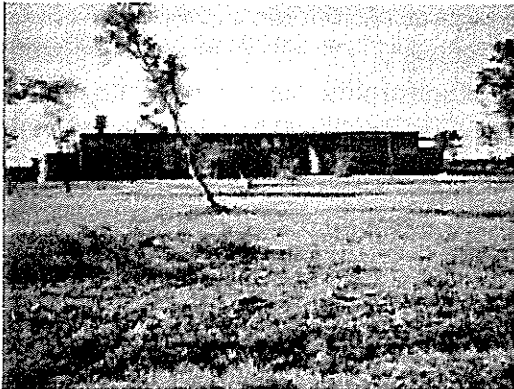
Vicki Darkin and daughter, Sondra, with director Lee Robinson at the fund raiser.

Photo courtesy Alice Springs News - (Dorothy Grimm) Vol 7, Issue 33 August 16th 2000



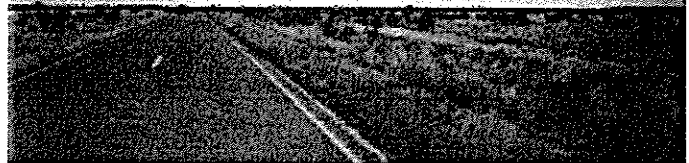
MEMORY LANE

Police Station Avon Downs 1967.



Harry & Christine Cox
Avon Downs 1999

The Barkly Highway 1996



What a Gem



Elephants on the Barkly 1969

Photos courtesy Christine Cox.

EXCERPTS FROM 'THE COPPER'S WIFE' BY CHRISTINE COX

For three years, from 1967 to 1970, we lived at Avon Downs. Travelling west along the Barkly Highway from Avon Downs to the Stuart Highway, there were only two roadside inns along a barren and lonely 360km strip of bitumen - Frewena and Barry Caves. Both places are no more. Sixteen years ago the Barkly Homestead Roadhouse was established at the junction of the old Alexandria Downs stock route. However in our day, they provided a welcome break - albeit with many shortcomings - from the long journey that Harry had to make on patrol at least once a fortnight, and for me several times a year.

When we first arrived at Avon Downs, Herb and Mrs Harms were running the roadside inn at Barry Caves, approximately 68 kilometres west of Avon Downs. The stone walls and desert landscape gave it the appearance of a Mexican hacienda, however, in that remote area it was a haven for truckies, tourists and other travellers alike. Herb's sober and serious nature was to be of great assistance to Harry when stolen vehicles were on the road. Herb would ring Harry and advise him that a particular vehicle had just refuelled there and was heading our way. That enabled Harry to set up a roadblock. Harry could gauge the time it would take for the vehicle to reach Avon, and of night time he could see the lights the moment they came over the 'jump up', some 22 kilometres from the police station.



That jump up was removed years later when the road was upgraded. What stunned many an apprehended felon was the element of surprise. They could never work out how Harry had known that they were travelling his way. Apart from two-way radio, the main means of communication was the manually operated party line telephone. From Camooweal just over the border in Queensland, it ran through Avon Downs Cattle Station and Police Station, Soudan Station, Barry Caves, Wonarah, Frewena and Tennant Creek. Each place had its own code, similar to Morse code. Avon was, for instance, a long, a short and a long ring.

I was telephone office keeper at Avon. Because the cattle station was on eastern standard time and the police station on central standard time, it meant I had to be in attendance half an hour earlier than the other places. I'd quite often start operating at 5.30am and still be going until 10-11pm. It was an unspoken honour system that one did not listen in to others' calls. However, one day when Graham took suddenly ill, I phoned the hospital in Tennant Creek to seek advice and was told to bring him straight in - a 300km plus trip. I hadn't taken one step away from the phone, when it rang. It was Mrs Harms from Barry Caves. I'd heard that she was an eavesdropper but until that moment I wasn't sure.

Apparently in her vast and lonely planet existence, Mrs Harms couldn't help herself. I tried to understand that people do strange things in strange places and thus was more forgiving of her little foible when she said that she'd heard that our baby was sick and that cornflour and water was a good remedy for diarrhoea! I was so flabbergasted that I thanked her and gently hung up the receiver.

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The following is a little story based on truth, evocative of Barry Caves, that I had published in an anthology, *Life Beyond the Louvres*, in 1989. I called it *A Fine Specimen*.

It was one of those little outback pubs that stood like an oasis amidst the barren moonscape of the Barkly Tablelands. That such places were people with cut throat petrol pirates and cold pie merchants did not in the least diminish their appeal to thirsty wayfarers.

Fred knew the next watering hole was Frewena, an hour's drive to the west, or eastwards for two hours to Camooweal. Fred knew too that his rheumy eyed, sallow skinned and slack mouthed countenance, would take on an almost angelic appearance to travellers in the last throes of dehydration and exhaustion. They'd sit up and beg like slavering puppies at the mere mention of a cold beer. That a stubby cost twice as much wouldn't even make them flinch. By the time they'd had their fill they'd be beyond arguing about prices anyway. It was only the local cowboys and ringers who got a bit argumentative at times. They settled down when Fred unstrapped his wooden leg and started flaying them with it.

When Fred and Barbara took over Barry Caves back in the late sixties they'd dreamed of building the place up into a grandiose five star motel. The previous owners had extolled the virtues of the place to such an extent, that when Fred had first set eyes on his 'dream', he collapsed into a quivering delirium of remorse. From that day onwards he was never again to be found sober. His contribution to upgrading the place was a single coat of whitewash over the rough, stone hewn, hacienda-style motel units. Barbara planted a few contorted cactus plants out front to give the place a 'bit of greenery'. Fred ran the bar, Barbara, the dining room. A mouldy plastic strip curtain enticed the hungry into the eatery. Mismatched chrome chairs and chipped Laminex tables covered with tattered polythene cloths saw half empty salt and pepper shakers corralled alongside messy sauce bottles. Greying artificial roses hung limply from cracked wall vases, whilst

**Please contact us if you have any interesting stories, historical information or photos that may interest our readers.
Address to left.**



windowsills provided a graveyard for dead flies, beetles and an occasional desiccated frog.

Barbara would bellow, 'Take it or leave it!' when tourists eyed the greasy stew, curry or stroganoff- all originally from the same enormous pot. Lying next to the meat dishes in the lukewarm Bain Marie were grey potatoes and shrunken peas.

Wiping her sweaty brow with a tea towel and flicking a strand of dusty red hair from her eye, Barbara would slop the food haphazardly on to thick china plates bearing the logo of Commonwealth Railways.

Under a thick mangle of red dust, packets of Marlboro cigarettes, boxes of Redhead matches, tins of Log Cabin ready rubbed, an ancient Kodak film, cans of shoestring beetroot with rust-spotted labels, a packet of Modess, and a can of baked beans, stood silently waiting to satisfy some customer's great need. Further along in a little huddle all on their own were flyspecked tubes of Colgate and a packet of Rinso.

Bare foot prints, thong prints, cowboy boot prints and sandshoe prints stood out clearly in the dust covering the crumbling linoleum floor.

Another plastic strip curtain led from the exterior into the bar. Evidence of recent repairs to two of the archaic and battered stools, used as weapons during a brawl, bore mute testimony to Fred's prowess as a Jack-of-all-trades.

An endless fraying towel, printed with beer labels, ran the full length of the bar and curved away into some dark forbidding corner. Like Dad's Army, bottles of Galliano, whiskey, Bacardi, Bundy, gin and ouzo lined the wall behind the bar.

Higher shelves held rows of rocks. Everything from copper ore from the Isa to Anthony's Lagoon ribbon-stone created much conversation and argument, but none more so than the specimen in the big green jar.

Fred had capitalised on 'the great Australian rock hunt' back then. Little old ladies of the blue rinse set, muscly tattooed youths, retired bank managers and excited children combed the great continent for agate, amethyst, aquamarine, beryl, topaz, tourmaline, opal, quartz, amber, jade and garnet.

Coach loads of eager rock hounds would descend on 'the Caves' to buy their mandatory chocolate coated ice-cream and turn the roadside

gravel over in a desperate bid to find their El Dorado.

At the height of the craze Fred was selling half a tonne of gibbers a week. It was quite by accident that I happened to be at 'the Caves' when Neil Armstrong first set foot on the moon. It was also my birthday. With two reasons to celebrate, Harry and I stayed longer than we'd planned. The jukebox leapt to the wailing strains of Rolf Harris singing Two Little Boys and the smell of stale onions wafted into the bar from the kitchen. It seemed as though, in the euphoria of man's successful moon mission, nothing would dampen the exuberance of the crowded bar.

My birthday was toasted repeatedly by denim clad stockmen and visiting strangers alike. Roger Miller's, *King of the Road* could be heard over the roar of cheers.

Attention again focused on the big green jar. 'Get it Down, Fred!' chorused the happy drinkers. Fred reluctantly agreed to show it around for just five seconds. With much pomp and ceremony Fred showed the crowd, never letting the jar out of his hands. He placed it back on the high shelf as if it held a fragile dinosaur's egg of infinitesimal value.

'It's petrified wood!' yelled Billy Bowen from Brunette.

'Na, Ya wrong, Billy. Its volcanic lava from the 'Curry!' answered George, the dogger.

'Bullshit!' exploded Jim from Alroy. 'Getting close', murmured Fred with a knowing smirk.

The sudden arrival of a white skinned, politely spoken tourist caused a hush around the room. Although the English gentleman was suffering dreadfully from the 50-degree heat, he made a heroic effort to be nonchalant in the face of such a bawdy crowd of locals. His first beer did little to quench his searing thirst. By the time he'd downed his third he was more than a little inebriated.

'I say old chap', he said to Fred, 'may I book a room for the night?'

Fred was delighted to oblige. By evening the unsuspecting guest would have parted with many more dollars on beer and a further amount for accommodation, plus of course the cost of a meal or two.

The gentleman would sleep soundly in the thick stone walled unit. The bush air conditioner would help cool the place down and he probably wouldn't even notice the huge grey wolf spiders or the big black



desert cockroaches scabbling and scuffling around the walls and floor.

One day a dear little old lady tourist had rushed into the bar. In her shaking hand she held a pale green opaque stone.

'How much can I have this for?' She eagerly asked Fred. Fred took the 'gem' from her. He got his magnifying glass from the drawer and carefully examined it. Turning it this way and that he finally handed it back.

Blowing several flies off his moist lower lip, Fred replied reluctantly, 'I'll let you have it for \$15.' With her newfound treasure, the happy lady rushed back to the coach where the other passengers oohed and ahhed with great envy.

'Bit rude, Fred', drawled Dan from Avon.

'Whadaya mean?' snorted Fred.

'Well I mean to say, it was only a lump of old cement.'

'I run my business on I and E - Ignorance and Enterprise. Their ignorance and my enterprise', smirked Fred. 'She's 'appy. I'm'appy.'

The Englishman stayed on in the bar long after the sun faded beneath the spinifex and coolabahs. Most of the station folk had drifted out to their Toyotas, leaving Fred, Harry and me.

Because of his gregarious nature, Fred soon became enveloped in a little cloud of near boredom. Suddenly he slapped a chunk of rock on the counter in front of my husband. 'Whadaya reckon that is, 'Arry?'

Harry knew it was ribbon-stone but decided to string Fred along a little. The tourist became intrigued too. Finally Harry said, 'Ribbon-stone'. Fred appeared a little crestfallen.

"Ere, what's this then?' Fred snarled.

'Malachite', ventured the tourist.

'And this', said Fred, reached for the big green jar.

In the darkened bar no amount of squinting could penetrate the thick glass. In a flash the jar was back on the high shelf.

'Petrieved wood?' 'Na. That's what they all say.'

'Where did you say it come from?'

'Picked it up along the road, mate.'

"Good God, man, it must be worth a fortune!"

'You bet!' This went on and on for hours until finally the Englishman exclaimed, 'I don't think you know what it is yourself. Anyway, I'm going to bed.'

At sunrise the next day the rather seedy Pom fuelled his car for the run into Tennant.

'Couldn't for the life of me work out what it was', he said to Barbara as she slapped the cap roughly back on his tank.

'Oh, you mean the elephant turd? Fred's had a helluva lot of fun with that since the circus came through.'

Frewena had been established during the bituminising of the highway pre-World War II, however in post-war years it was being run as a fuel and refreshment stop for the travelling public. As with so many Territory roadside inns, depending on the proprietors at the time, it too had a chequered history. When we first went to Avon, two young men were running Frewena One shimmering hot day we were on our way home from Tennant Creek and pulled in for a cold drink or two. Because the swimming pool looked so inviting, Harry asked if we could have a dip. With permission granted, I jumped in- straight onto a broken stubby bottle While my badly gashed foot was being bandaged we asked why the glass was in the pool The languid response was, "Oh yeah, that's right, we had a party there last night, smashed a few floating bottles, thought we'd got 'em all out."

Another day I'd ordered a much-needed cuppa. Out came a tray complete with small aluminium teapot, milk and the like. When I lifted the pot to pour my tea, out popped a beetle. Having become used to such minor annoyances in the bush, I simply lifted the little beastie out, drank my tea, and went to the counter to pay. The price quoted was ridiculously high, however when I asked how much extra it was for the beetle, I was met with genuine apologies and my proffered coinage was gently pushed back towards me. Eventually, when new owners took over at Frewena, they made a valiant and satisfactory endeavour to rid the place of its reputation for violent brawling and other unsavoury conduct involving certain kinds of relief for truckies and ringers alike.

When threatened by drink-crazed patrons, the new owner, Eugene, would reach under the bar for his



own self-styled 'baton'. Once the offender set eyes on the sawfish saw, fashioned with a good gripping handle, about 400mm in length, they backed off.

There have been several notorious and well-publicised murders on the Barkly over the years but there are many other horror stories that go unreported. I was to experience the most terrifying drive of my life along the Barkly Highway. I normally travelled in the police Toyota with Harry but on this particular day because it was necessary to take both vehicles into Tennant Creek; I was to drive our Holden station wagon

Just before our early morning departure from Avon Downs, the phone rang. I muttered my annoyance as I unlocked the door leading on to the large fly-wired verandah. Gold and mandarin slices crisscrossed the blackness of the morning sky. The air, thick with the honey sweet aroma of citrus, was already warm and the flies swarmed around the flowering grape vine on the trellis just outside the front door "Good morning, Avon Downs Police Station. Yes, he's here. I'll get him for you..."

"Got to go, dar! I'll wait for you at Frewena". Harry crushed me to his massive chest and enveloped me in his powerful arms. His Old Spice aftershave and my Yardley lavender enveloped us in a loving aura. We'd become closer in that lonely land. We each depended on. The other more than ever. As he kissed me hard on my lips I went weak at the knees. God, how I loved this man.

"Hey enough of this!" Harry said, "I'll get going and meet you at Frewena. You'll be half an hour behind me, right?"

"Yep, and I'll drive every centimetre of the 400 kays ever so carefully. I'll have our two babies on board, remember," I laughed. "I'm really looking forward to the drive. Breaks the monotony of being stuck out here by myself for weeks on end. And best of all I can go shopping."

With the sun just bursting over the distant horizon, and singing 'I'm on the road again', I gunned the car into action and set off to the west. In about two hours I'd meet Harry. Baby Ellen was asleep in her bassinette while two-year-old Graham sat next to me in his car seat happily chewing on his favourite blue rabbit rattle.

Because the children were quiet and contented, I didn't stop at Barry Caves, some 100kms from Avon. Still singing to myself, I slowed down to 80kph. as I passed the little roadside inn, and then put my foot down to 100kms. Harry had always told me that was a safe speed and that if anything untoward happened, I'd be able to control the vehicle without any problems.

My reverie was suddenly shattered. The squeal of tyres and a babble of obscene voices rent the air. Right beside me, not more than a metre away, was another station wagon, older, much older than mine, and in it were four men. They made rude gestures with their hands and yelled obscenities at me. My blood ran cold. My face flushed hot and cold. My head spun. In an instant, I decided to slow down. They must've seen me as I drove past Barry Caves and decided then on their little game. They slowed, and stayed abreast. I kept the wheels on the bitumen and mouthed the words, "Please stop doing this". Great guffaws of laughter emerged from the louts. A hand touched the window. More laughter. "I beg you, please stop!" I pleaded, burning with terror.

They dropped back and I sped up a little. Just to a hundred 'Never over a hundred', I heard Harry's words. They drew alongside on the wrong side, on the gravel this time, spraying my windows with a shower of pebbles. "I've got babies with me," I shrieked. They roared laughing

The landscape of low contorted bushes rushed by. Nowhere to turn. No one to help. Not a soul lived in this neck of the woods. I'd never felt so alone in all my life. Would I, should I go faster? What if I roiled? Harry would find us - or some other decent traveller - would report the accident to Harry. He'd never know that the louts had been part of the story. He'd just think I'd been driving too fast and had lost control. Would his journal entry be like all the others? Clipped, formal, precise - "Fatal accident. Barkly Highway. Fifty kilometres east of Frewena. Three dead. One woman. Two children." Would he load the bodies into the plastic body bags like the others he'd had to attend to? Would a grown man cry? By then the louts would have laughed their way into Tennant Creek.

Would Harry even believe me, if I managed to survive? He had a habit of dismissing my concerns. He was a policeman through and through. The odd times I'd given him the low down on incidents that had



happened in his absence, he often hadn't even journalled them. When it was necessary to journal events concerning me, he just put 'wife' in the journal. He didn't even give me a name. That was the one thing I hated about him. So bloody officious. Always ready to give me a lecture but never ready to really listen to what I was telling him. 'Wife' reported this, or 'wife' reported that. I was as anonymous as a speck of dust so much for the love that I'd felt for him only an hour or so beforehand. The pendulum on that psychologically ambivalent metre between love and hate swung over to 'H' as I tried to evade my car-borne assailants.

I was his back stop at home. His offsider. I tended to the injured, the ill, and the enquiries when he was out on patrol. It was me that spent the lonely nights lying awake listening to the dogs bark and the odd uninvited traveller rummaging around looking for petrol in the police yard at some ungodly hour of the morning. I was no martyr but I wanted him to take more notice of what I did behind the scenes. He would if I were to be killed by these 'animals' that were terrorising me now. My life was flashing before my eyes.

In those days, women, especially police wives, were very much in a category similar to that of children, of being 'seen but not heard'. The police hierarchy took scant regard of anything the women had to say. It was truly a 'man's world' out in the bush. Yet when it came to relying on the wives to 'hold the fort' in the absence of the policemen, the expectations that the same 'silent' women could cope with any contingency, went unquestioned. In other words, many police wives were unsung heroes of the time and no doubt are still deserving of high praise for similar efforts in this day and age.

Job wise, Harry had had the aura of a statesman. He was little different from American presidents, Clinton excepted, whose wives were only dragged out and dusted off at election time.

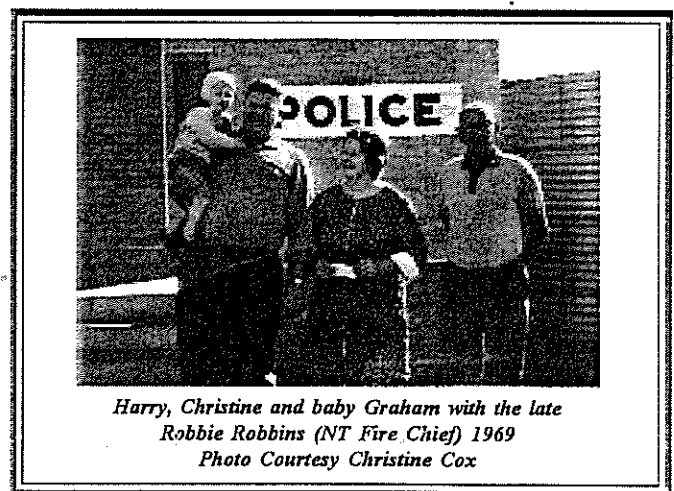
It was up to me to remind him occasionally that his all, enveloping aura diminished mine, and that when I felt I'd been painted into a corner, I'd react in some way. It might be a little puff of anger, a warning, like the goanna that hissed at me once because I was sitting on it well worn pad to the river. Or the feral cat's snarling attack when it found itself bailed up a tree. Worst of all would be the 'I'm, packing my bags' reaction akin to a mother bird being disturbed

at her nest.

Regardless, my little outburst would clear the air and everything would return to a semblance of normalcy, until the next time.

The louts were still there. Right along side me again. The obscenities got worse. They made it clear what they wanted to do to me. The leering faces, the piercing eyes, the slobbering mouths made me aware of what a bitch on heat must feel like. Only thing was I wasn't sending out the pheromones - or whatever they were - to attract the mongrels. Some people would call them dingoes - cowards. I wouldn't. As much as the damage they might cause to sheep flocks and cattle herds, I had a healthy respect for native our dog. I'd had one as a pet when I was a kid. Dusty couldn't be compared with this pack of mongrels.

Harry would be drinking a cold can of soda water - he never drank beer when he was on duty - at the bar at Frewena by now. He'd be chatting to the licensee completely unaware of the predicament his wife and children were in.



*Harry, Christine and baby Graham with the late Robbie Robbins (NT Fire Chief) 1969
Photo Courtesy Christine Cox*

I put my foot to the floor. The speedo leapt up the damage as they might cause to sheep flocks and and up... 110, 120, 130, 140kph. Then I spotted it and let out a howl of relief. The radio mast, the only sign in that deserted landscape. One thing in my favour was that this carload of hooners from Queensland didn't know the area. They didn't have a clue that they were coming up to Frewena. As I drew a kilometre away from them, they were nearly choking with laughter. They knew the chase would soon be over, they'd seen my ghostly pallor. The tears streaming down my face. By the time they ran me to ground, I'd be as submissive as a rag doll. Oh what fun they'd have. They were probably already arguing who'd go



first.

I managed to draw another kilometre away. Although I slowed down, as I turned right into the driveway, I was still going too fast, fast enough to spray the petrol pumps with gravel. Harry's Toyota was parked just outside the saloon. My trembling hands fumbled at the baby restraints. Quickly I snatched the babies from the car and ran inside, crying and laughing at the same time. Hysteria. Yes, I was absolutely hysterical. It was all I could do to spit out the words, "they're following me...".

The pendulum swung again to love the moment I saw Harry. He truly was my rock and I loved him to bits. Harry gave me a quick cuddle and ran outside.

Still leering and laughing, the hoons pulled up alongside my car. Harry stepped forward "Come here you lot, I want to talk to you. ."

The few patrons in the bar rushed to the dusty, fly-screened windows to witness the proceedings. In an instant, they saw the demeanour of the four macho men turn to water. "Only, joking, officer..." the hoons said in unison as they hung their heads submissively. "You bastards could have killed my wife and kids. You mongrels." Harry's fists clenched. It was hard to contain his fury. He had to make a decision, arrest them or let them go. After taking their names and car rego, he decided on the latter course of action. He also told them that he'd advise Tennant Creek and Camooweal of their behaviour and that no matter where they travelled in the Territory, they'd be watched. They refuelled and headed west to Tennant, meek as four little lambs. The reason why Harry didn't arrest them was two-fold, firstly, with a good lawyer, they could all lie their heads off and I'd be made to

look like an utter fool and liar. Secondly, he wanted to take care of me. With copious cups of tea to assist, I was able to regain my composure and travel in front of Harry this time.

DRUNKENNESS IN THE EARLY DAYS

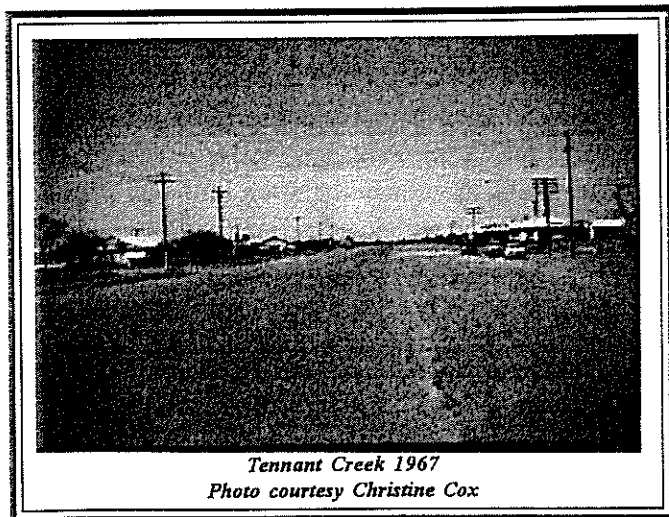
By WR (Bill) Wilson

The following an article in a series provided by Bill to the retired Police Association to celebrate the 130 Years of Policing (1870-2000)

Heavy consumption of liquor in the Northern Territory is not a recent occurrence. From the earliest days of European settlement, drinking has been a Territory pastime. As Mounted Constable Turner noted, 'men who never drank in their lives have come here and fallen to the square'. The 'Square' was gin, the name deriving from the shape of the quart bottle, which cost 13s with a pint bottle of beer costing 1/9. the usual way to drink a gin was to mix it with water, which made it a cheap way to get drunk. A return of stimulants consumed in the Northern Territory in 1906 shows that the amount of alcohol consumed by the non-aboriginal male population was almost twelve gallons for each European man. Gin was an improvement on the earlier drink 'Sunset rum' much favoured by European miners, methylated spirit and kerosence mixed with Worcester sauce and flavoured with ginger and sugar. Alternatively, there was wine made from a bottle of wine to which was added, 'Gin, vinegar and saltpetre'. The resultant brew would 'burn the bottom out of an iron bucket in a night'.

Further evidence of the Territory being notorious for hard drinking came at a Royal Commission into the Northern Territory in 1895. One witness WF Fox said 'it's a great place for drinking'; another, JCF Johnson MP, recalled 'when I was in the Territory I could not eat without a stimulant'. Even a local newspaper was moved to record that alcohol had 'been a curse and blasted many a promising career ... the use of alcohol in excess has largely been a curse in this tropical paradise'.

Amongst the earliest charges laid after Darwin was established was that against Thomas Gollard, the settlement's armourer, charged with drunkenness and making noise in the camp on 2 July 1870. Gollard was fined five shillings but after reflecting on the penalty the Government Resident reduced the penalty to a caution. Penalties rose quickly. In September 1885 Joseph Abdoolah was fined five pounds. By 1901 penalties



Tennant Creek 1967
Photo courtesy Christine Cox



had become more flexible, with three offenders being cautioned and one fined three pounds seven shillings for drunkenness at one court sitting.

To place the Northern Territory on the Canadian prairies makes an interesting comparison. Canadian police also faced problems with drunkenness and liquor related offences. On the Canadian prairies, shortly after the arrival of police, the sale of alcohol was banned in order to protect the Indigenous people. Despite this, in many of the prairie towns, breweries were built, ostensibly to manufacture a non-alcoholic hop beer. Police were content to let these operations flourish even though there was evidence that the produce did lead to intoxicated saloon patrons brawling after consuming the nonalcoholic beverage. Canadian police were more concerned with preventing the sale of alcohol to Indigenous people, many of whom became violently drunk after imbibing the hop beer.

From 1886 onwards complaints began to arrive in Ottawa about the police failing to take action over trafficking of liquor. The complaints highlighted the difficulties police faced in enforcing a law which was not respected by a large segment of the population. It became obvious that something had to be done to improve the situation and in 1888 a permit system for the sale and consumption of light, or near, beer was introduced. Entrepreneurs quickly found ways to breach the permits and smuggling of full strength beer became a major problem for the Mounted Police. Much of the illegal liquor was smuggled into Canada from the United States in crates labelled 'sugar' or 'salt'. On one occasion, eggshells were found to contain alcohol. On another occasion a passenger on a train was found with a ten-gallon keg of whiskey in his possession. The sale of alcoholic beverages and resultant drunkenness was a major problem. One member recorded in his 'Order Book' that a prime duty was the prevention of importation of intoxicating liquor into unorganised Portions [sic] of the 'NWT'. Prairie Canadians drank an average of four gallons of alcoholic beverages for every man, woman and child during this period, far less than the Northern Territory population.

The data available does not readily disclose the racial origin of persons charged with drunkenness in the Northern Territory. Most of those recorded in charge books however were Europeans. This is not to say that Aboriginal people did not drink at all:

There was an alcoholic jamboree - 'white-feller fashion' - among some natives on Saturday night ... as festive hours fled by the racket became so obtrusive that it disturbed the rest of a guardian of the peace with no ear for music, who wrathfully entered upon the scene of revelry at about midnight... on the appearance of the law there was a sudden weird silence ... One inebriated father with glassy eye ... gravely explained to the police that he had been trying to teach his little son to sing God Save the King. On the Monday morning several dusky travellers with sore heads were dismissed with a caution whilst the Chinese supplier of the inspiring liquor was fined thirteen pounds.

From the time they arrived in the Territory one of the major occupations of police was the control of liquor outlets. Not only did they direct their activities against the imbibers, they also sought to control licensees. In one early, celebrated case, the police objected to Martin O'Halloran taking charge of licensed premises after he was bailed on a charge of false pretences. The Government Resident advised the Minister that O'Halloran was 'much given to drink' and that police had visited his premises when 'he [was] nearly insane from drink'. The Resident was satisfied that the 'authorities' in the Northern Territory could deal with the situation.

'Sly-grogging' was also the subject of intensive police activity in Darwin during the first two decades of the twentieth century. A number of prosecutions for this offence occurred in the Pine Creek district between 1901 and 1908. Many of those charged were Chinese. A typical court result was reported on 10 October 1902. Ah Luck pleaded guilty to having been in possession of '1 1/2 bottles of square, 2 bottles of lager beer and 1 bottle of port wine'. Ah Luck was fined twenty pounds and the liquor seized.

Sly-grog shops flourished in Darwin between 1908 and 1918, but very few people faced court for offences in connection with these establishments. A major problem in bringing charges against those running or frequenting drinking establishments was that the few police officers in any Territory town, including Darwin, were well known. The mere sight of them approaching, in or out of uniform was enough to warn off the drinkers. Police resorted to acting as *agents provocateurs* in order to obtain convictions. In August 1917, undercover police who were working at



the Vestey Meatworks visited a cafe in Cavenagh Street with other meatworkers. They asked for and received two rounds of whiskey. A few days later, the same undercover police officers returned to the cafe where they again sought and were served whiskey. The proprietor of the cafe, Victor Konfaganos, was charged with selling liquor without a licence, even though he had not been present at the time of the offence. The magistrate, Stretton, sentenced Konfaganos to six months imprisonment and a fine of two hundred pounds. On 3 August Jack Robinson, an 'old man' who 'kept a house near the meatworks' pleaded guilty to a similar offence. He was gaoled for three months and fined one hundred pounds.

This article has briefly discussed drunkenness in the Territory from 1870 to 1917. Clearly it shows that heavy drinking is not a new phenomenon in the Territory, it has been a problem for police ever since the first South Australian settlement.

Peter Riley

letter

dated 9th August 2000

In the August Citation on the life and times of Jack Kennett whom I knew when I was stationed at Tennant Creek 1942 and 1943 and he at Barrow Creek. His wife was most likely the Post mistress there. The former Overland Telegraph station had loopholes in the walls for use of firearms against

attacking aboriginals. In April 1944, when I returned from leave to Alice Springs, Jack was then stationed there. On page 10 mention is made of Johnstons at Barrow ... 'Unhappy with the patrol work' I know of no Johnston but there were A.S. (Alf) Johnson and A.D. (Doug) Johnson.

Some more on Jack Kennett is this quote from page 166 of Ernstine Hill's, *The Great Australian Loneliness*, and,

... 'Kennett asleep on his lugger at Blunder Bay near the Victoria River, in a living hell of mosquitoes, had his right hand nearly chopped away. That job ended in the grave illness of Constable Kennett at Timber Creek, a delirium of fear and fever in which he refused to sleep without his dog in the room.'

This refers to an attack by aboriginals.



Constable Kennet
Photo courtesy Kennet family

CAN ANYONE ASSIST WITH ANY INFORMATION ABOUT THE TWO PHOTOS ON PAGE 12

These photos were located in the collection of our late member, Jim Berry. Our appreciation goes to his daughter Karen for allowing us to re-produce them. We are uncertain to the identity of these ex members. It is understood the group photo may have been a long service medal presentation in 1965.

It is understood the group photo may have been a long service medal presentation in 1965. The second photo is of a second class Sergeant at the salt pans.

If you are able to identify these photos, please write to us and let us know. We would be most grateful.

