

prospector

This tape contains an interview with Harry King and it's about being on the Canning Stock Route. Harry is at Yarri at the moment. INTERVIEWER = Ian Morgan June 1971.
(SG = Yarni Battery is on Edjudina Str. 130 kiles NE Kalbarrie).



I was on the Canning Stock Route when Nightmarch won the Melbourne Cup in 1929. I was there for 16 months reconditioning the route. The Canning Expedition went through in 1906-07 to see if it was possible to get water and found it would be OK. Canning went back in 1910, I think, and put the wells down. It was quite a big team and it put down 51 wells over a distance of about 800 miles. Some 14, some 20 miles apart, good water with the exception of a couple. One or two permanent pools.

I was a timberman on the stock route doing general timber work. In the 19 years since 1910 they had brought down two mobs of cattle. Thompson and Shoesmith had started off with the first cattle and they were speared at No. 37 well. Their cattle were just let go. Thompson and Shoesmith weren't far behind Canning when Canning had just about completed the job. Canning had a little bit of strife with the natives but nothing to that extent.

There were 51 wells and it varied how far you had to go down for water. Putting down the post holes in one, that's No. 42, the water was that shallow that it was in the post holes. But that's an exception. About 60 feet would be the deepest. They'd average 30 or 40 feet with the exception of 2 or 3 that might be 60. We used a whip-pole to get the water up and we used to whip with the camel. You just put your bucket on and use the rope. A 20 gallon bucket waters fast especially with a camel. Faster than any pump. That's the way to water a mob of cattle. That's why you see all these stock route holes have got all these whip poles and pulley wheels on... whipping water.

I knew Canning himself. I was out with him before as a kid. I had just left school at 15 and we surveyed the bulk of all the pastoral areas and the Gascoyne and Eastern Goldfields ~~out on the trans line~~ out on the trans line. Well, I was with him for about 3 years and when I heard he'd got the job going up to recondition the stock route I applied too.

Canning was a private contract surveyor. He was in the government department before as a surveyor but then he went into partnership with Henry King and took on this contract survey. I think they surveyed 90 per cent of the pastoral leases throughout WA.

I got used to riding camels. I've ridden one all the way down the Canning Stock Route right from Billiluna to Wiluna. Camels are beaut to ride. Ambles just like an armchair. The camels were our main transport while we were reconditioning the route. Then there were the drays. We had 4 drays I think to start off but two of them we had to leave at Goodwin Soak, that's No. 11 well. That's the start of the sand. We took the rest as packs and we put nine camels in each of the other two drays that carried the bulk stuff like the swags.

There were 13 in the party, including a taxidermist from the museum.

The natives speared two of our camels. They got a hostile reception but what else could you do. They just came an the night and took a couple away. One just disappeared. Very quiet riding camel it was too. But the other one they



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found it where the natives had speared it and slaughtered it. They wanted to eat them. We could always tell when there were natives around. A lot of natives see us and we never see them but all that country is sandhills and if you heard the dingoes howling at night you'd know there were natives around. The dingoes follow the natives for scraps of some kind because there were very few 'roos there. And that was our signal that the natives were around. Sometimes they'd put spinifex on their feet so you wouldn't see their tracks. We weren't worried at that time. Once we'd seen about 40 there at that place. The only thing they could say was Woommani Picanniny, Woommani Picanniny. It's as if it had been some message that had been passed on to them somehow.

They were absolutely nothing. When Canning went through on the exploration in 1906-07 one of his men was speared. His grave is there No. 31 well I think that is. Canning and this man, Michael Tobin, went on ahead to see if they could find this native well. They knew there was one in the vicinity. Anyway they found it and Michael Tobin was trying to get some information from the black fellow in signs and talking and according to Canning he crouched down for some reason and the next thing the native up with a spear and got him right behind the ear somewhere. And Canning always vows that a native with a woomera is like a man with a loaded revolver. They're that quick. There's just a click. They're expert at it. He died that night. Michael Tobin has a stone on his grave.

There were one, two, three, four white men to look after the camels. They were what you called the transport. We'd go to one well with all our gear. Now what we called the transport people would take the troughing and all the other gear, anything that the natives couldn't damage or take away, to the next well and dump that there. Then all they'd have to take would be camping gear and tools when we'd finished the job. And so on until we got right through. When we got to No. 39 well we were out of provisions. Canning said we'd have to go right on to Hall's Creek to get some stores. Before we got there all we were eating were these little tins of red feather cheese and barley. That and powdered milk was all we had for about 3 or 4 days. Then we got to Billiluna Pool and the search was on to find Billiluna homestead. After two days we found the homestead about forty miles away from the pool. They came down the next day and shot a bullock so we had a big feast. We had Christmas there. We had left in 1929 and it was now just before Christmas I think. Mr Dick Rowan was the manager of Billiluna. The first thing somebody said was 'Who won the Melbourne Cup?' 'Oh,' he said 'Phar Lap'. That was 1930, nearly two months after the running of the cup, before we knew who won it. Of course there was no radio then in 1929/30. I suppose there was some around but none you could carry around like nowadays.

For maintenance of the route during the war, because it was essential then, they had different methods. They took provisions up in an aeroplane and dropped them in by parachute. It's a far cry from the pack camel days. I believe vehicles can get through now too. I believe with a four wheel drive they can traverse these sand dunes. They go along the dunes until they find a suitable place to cross, then they might have to go another couple of miles to get up the next one; some of them are only 100 to 200 yards apart...others are up to a mile apart. They're endless. Four hundred miles of sand hills one after the other.

There wouldn't have been much feed there. A beast would lose weight going from Hall's Creek to Wiluna. It's all spinifex apart from these occasional little water holes. And a strip of mulga here and there. There's nothing on the sand dunes. Just eroded all the time. Sometimes in a blow when packs have gone ahead of us with the drays you couldn't see their marks in 2 hours time on the top of the hill where they'd crossed over because of the moving sand drift. Nearly all the tops are bare on account of the wind.

A 100 ft sand dune would be a high one. On one side they taper. But on the other side it's too steep to go straight down. So you'd have to weave your way down but I wouldn't go so far as to say it would be a 100 foot. More like 50 ft. Sheer drops.

I was 19 when I was there in 1929 and I was paid £12 and my keep in the midst of the depression. Pretty good money. I was ~~checked~~^{stashed} up on my way back. 16 months of pay and no ways of spending it. So I was a very wealthy man in the midst of the depression. But I did a foolish thing and followed in the footsteps of my father... put it into a gold mine and it wasn't long before I didn't have any money.

Editor - Shelley Gare