

KUNUNURRA FARMING DAYS — THE WAY IT WAS

Denva Ball, our speaker for the April 2013 meeting, started his talk saying he arrived in Kununurra in 1963 originally to help his brother-in-law construct the service station. Under the building approvals, it had to be completed before work could start on the Kununurra Hotel. He also pointed out that he did not own a farm but had worked on a number of places including cotton farms when they were introduced.

Turning the wild plains of the Ord Valley into cultivated farm land may have seemed a radical if not impossible dream, but in the 1940s – largely through the work of Kim Durack – tropical agriculture in the Kimberley became a reality. Once the governments of the day were convinced of the viability of irrigating Australia's north, an initial investment of £20 million was made and the Ord River Irrigation Scheme was born. The first farmers arrived in 1963; 30 farms were allocated and established; and a tight knit community emerged around the newly established town of Kununurra.

Cotton was harvested from 1964 onward, and, with the opening of Stage Two of the Ord Irrigation Project, a number of farmers came from the USA. As Denva's photos showed, they were instantly recognisable because of their Stetson hats, which he said they never were seen without! He had slides showing how inventive the early farmers were. They had to be innovative with their equipment because of their distance from supplies and, by comparison with today's machinery, it was very primitive. Things such as constructing covers over their tractors to protect themselves from the intense Kimberley heat as there were no air-conditioned cabs. In fact, there were no cabs at all. Denva then showed slides of farmers sitting in tractors with no protection from the sun, just their hats and trousers.

In the early days they aerial sprayed their crops with DDT. One slide showed a young woman in T-shirt and trousers holding "markers" for the pilot. She had to stand in the rows of cotton plants to guide the pilot down the rows and ducked at the last minute as he flew overhead and moved to the next section to be sprayed. No doubt getting sprayed in the process! The spraying was originally carried out every second day. As Denva said, Work Safe didn't exist then.

Initially they planted all year round but the insect pests became immune to the DDT and ultimately caused the downfall of the early Ord cotton industry. Today the spraying is only carried out twice, firstly at germination and then the defoliator when the crop is ready to harvest. Helicopters have replaced the light aircraft as it was decided the down draft from the helicopter gave better penetration to the plants. Crop rotation was not done initially; it was only later when new crops were being trialled such as melons, peanuts, rice and sugar.

Another slide showed how in the early days Urea was emptied by the bagful into the head ditch to fertilize the crops, again very different from today's hi tech systems of adding fertilizer. The water siphons had to be changed regardless of the time of day or night, and Denva remembered getting up at 4 AM to change the siphons as the cost of water for irrigation was not cheap and no one wanted to waste it. Water was obtained from sub channels by means of a water wheel which measured the amount of water used, and the farmer was then billed for that amount. Denva explained how the water was gravitated through the various channels and then head ditches and finally the siphons to deliver the irrigation to the crops. Also, how all the levels had been constructed by using very primitive land levellers which were hand made by farmers.

Another wonderful photo showed the local farm kids all sitting at the front of the cotton harvester at the end of the day as they were returning home.

Denva showed a slide of a 4-wheeled trailer with canvas sides and said how he brought his bride from Perth to Kununurra and when she saw her "new home" she cried. He said he couldn't blame her as he would have done the same!

A few very amusing stories of the early days included one of having to guard all the spare parts such as hub caps and oil tins from the service station because the Booze Shed, as it was called, had no glasses (after a fire) and a great deal of improvisation was done. The bank manager from Wyndham, who was nicknamed "Maverick" used to come over every Friday and sit at a table at the back of the Booze Shed and do all the banking for the community. He was reputed to drive home very fast with a gun sitting on his passenger seat! He repeated this journey every week until the Kununurra Hotel opened and the Booze Shed was no longer the "local".

Denva felt it was a great shame that the cotton industry as he knew it collapsed, and in 1974 he left Kununurra. His closing comments were that, despite all the hardships people endured, it was a tremendous community to live in and he missed "the good old days".

Susan Clarkson