

32 YEARS OF TRAVELLING THE CANNING STOCK ROUTE

On 7 August 2013, after listening to **Eric Gard** speak at our meeting, I had the pleasure of having him sign my copy of *Canning Stock Route: A Traveller's Guide for a Journey Through History*. He and his wife Ronele wrote that book, and Eric's talk brought back many memories.

Eric is currently enjoying retirement after a career that included working as a pilot with the R.A.N., and then in Canada before returning to Australia in 1975 and joining an oil company. Since 1980, he and Ronele have travelled the Canning Stock Route more than 40 times.

Eric's talk was a wonderful blend of geography, botany and history. He mentioned the original establishment of the route by Alfred Canning in the early 20th century and his refurbishment of it in 1930–31, after another contractor proved unsuccessful. Even at this latter stage Canning was still active with his own surveying business.

One reason I was so taken with Eric's talk was that I was lucky enough to go down the stock route in August 1991 with Halls Creek and Bungle Bungle Tours and also in the company of Len Hill. Len had gone up and down the stock route as a 19-year-old in 1946 with Ben Taylor, a drover. As it happened, someone had a copy of the Gards' recently published book. At each well we read it and it was almost a station of the cross. The trip was made all the more memorable with Len's reminiscences of episodes that had happened on the cattle drive. He said going down they saw lots of "smokes" from Aboriginal people who were still living and travelling around the stock route. At the southern end of the stock route we met a lady from one of the stations. Len hadn't seen her or her husband for over 40 years, yet they remembered each other. Such is the pastoral industry. I distinctly remember this woman who was well into her 80's being unable to get out of the 4 wheel drive as her Dermatologist had told her to avoid any sun exposure as she was prone to skin cancers.

Another thing I remember was Len Hill pointing that out the tracks of the cattle were still visible. We saw quite a lot of camels and every day there was evidence of camel tracks or the occasional skeleton. I think our weapon of choice for disposing of bull camels was a Magnum, which was licensed to the manager of the tour company who was also a stock agent. Not the .44 made famous by Clint Eastwood in the Dirty Harry movies but still pretty impressive! There were lots of flat tyres, and one shock absorber replaced. The company was exceedingly well prepared. So much so that on about our 10th night of the trip near Marble Bar our meal consisted of freshwater cobbler from Lake Argyle. It was a great tour and, going by the anecdotes Eric shared with us, probably comparable to some of his tag along trips.

The Gards really own the Canning Stock Route. Since 1980, they have been up it as many times as cattle drives down the stock route. They have put more into the stock route with signage, deemed necessary after the tragic loss of the teenage jackaroos Simon Amos and James Annetts in 1986. Unfortunately over 90% of the signage has been souvenired. They also helped install a two story toilet which was later burnt down. It has since been replaced. Eric said at the end of the talk he felt he had one more trip left in him with some mutual friends but he felt Ronele may have a different idea!

The slides were excellent and included some of the desert blooming after big rains from the monsoons. Others showed wells, campsites and graves. I learned that the desert oak is the second hardest timber known but, even so, rails made to surround graves along the stock route will eventually rot away because of the exposure to the extremes in weather. Also, Savory Creek, near which I had camped, is apparently twice as saline as the Dead Sea. Eric says that his wife likes to bathe in it but it's not to his liking.

He also had some very cautionary tips about the Canning Stock Route.

1. You should never travel alone, and there should always be a backup vehicle.
2. A spare set of shock absorbers for the front is always advisable.

3. After-market shock absorbers will usually fail on a Canning trip especially with the horrendous corrugations that are now present with a height of 10cm and about a metre between them.
4. Petrol vehicles are not suited to the stock route, and there are some 14 or 15 burnt out petrol vehicles along it. This is related to the fact that Spinifex builds up beneath the vehicles and the radiators and, with modern catalytic converters reaching a temperature of 800° centigrade, a fire is almost inevitable. Aluminium cars such as the Range Rovers burnt very well once alight.
5. Mercedes Benz vehicles on a recent trip all suffered severely.
6. Radios are a must for communication between the various groups travelling there.
7. Driving on salt pans or salt lakes such as Aerodrome Lake is very risky because vehicles can break through the crust and become seriously bogged.

At least 33 deaths have occurred along the stock route and Eric mentioned a group of about 11 people who died going out to Punmu in January 1991. Unfortunately a child who had been one of my patients was amongst that group.

There are certainly some interesting characters met coming down the Stock Route. Eric mentioned a couple in their 80s with a converted Cowleys Pie Cart from Adelaide. They were travelling by themselves. For those of you who have never been to Adelaide and seen the Pie Carts at the Town Hall or Victoria Square or up on the Norwood Parade they dispense pies, often in a thick pea soup, called a pie floater. There was also a gentleman with two camels who had gone up the coast of Western Australia and who was going down the Stock Route on his way to Esperance and then perhaps across the Nullarbor Plain. He carried a large rifle to protect his camels against bull camels in heat.

We also heard about other stock routes, and that Eric had recommended to the appropriate government authority that the Canning Stock Route, the Peak Hill Stock Route and the Bedford Stock Route be preserved. That was in response to a move to close old stock routes. The Bedford Stock Route, of which I was unaware, stretches from Fossil Downs to Wyndham and would be a wonderful trip especially if one can take time to find many of the gorges that are hidden along the way and not mentioned in any popular travel guide.

Lastly Eric mentioned that the 3rd edition of the *Canning Stock Route* book is virtually sold out. There are a few copies left in Perth at the Pit Stop Book Shop and some other map shops which I can't remember.

Jack Vercoe