

Yarnin' with Grandpa

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A collection of personal stories from Arabana Elder Thanthi Syd
Strangways

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Wangka Arabana (Arabana language) is an Australian Aboriginal language from the Kati Thanda (Lake Eyre) region in South Australia. The Arabana community is engaged in language revival activities to ensure that wangka will continue to be spoken by future generations. Online language lessons and videos are available at **portal.mobilelanguageteam.com.au**



For my granddaughter Yasmin and daughter Colleen

Contents

Foreword

Introduction

Yarnin' with Grandpa

Grandpa's School Days

Min Min Lights

Memories of Early Days

Walking Traveller

Beliefs, Rituals and Smoke

Grandfather and the Kartha Kartha Men

Minparu

Arabana Ways and Customs

Kurdaityi, the Aboriginal Police

Photos

Finniss Springs and the Supernatural

Barney

Madla-Yapa, the Dingo

Horses, Packs and Saddles

My Sister, Redwing

Me and the Railways

Thanthi's Story

Kati Thanda

Foreword

My father Sydney Strangways is such an inspiration in so many ways. He has dedicated himself to teaching others, as well as learning about and understanding the world in which we live.

Growing up we were always out bush camping, enjoying family time, traveling to Port Augusta and Marree on dirt roads, and visiting family who are long gone now.

These are my childhood memories, and now as an adult I cherish them. I also cherish my adult years with my father as he shares his cultural wisdom and teachings. These stories naturally come out as we sit with a cuppa or around the campfire at Finnis.

I'm proud of what he has given to the Arabana community and the high respect that he holds. I love my father, a great Arabana Elder, my Apityi.

- Colleen Strangways, 1st March 2021

Introduction



Arru... I am an Arabana man from the western Lake Eyre region (Kati Thanda).

My grandmother and my father were both born in the Country that was to become Finnis Springs Station. I myself was born about a kilometre south-east of the homestead. That was before the Mission was established. At the time, there was a large group of nomadic Arabana people camped there and my parents were part of that group.

Because of my fair skin, I was given into the care of my grandmother soon after birth because the official government policy was to remove all fair-skin and half-caste children from Aboriginal parents. At that time, there was a large encampment of Arabana people living up further north at an important living area, almost on the shores of Lake Eyre. Arabana call this place Gudnampanha but is known by Europeans as Curdimurka, which is an adaptation of the Arabana word Kardimarrkara, which, in turn, is part of a dreamtime story and is the name of a large water snake that now lives in the sky. It was to this place that my grandmother took me and I spent my early days of childhood there. Whenever a police patrol or an official government party came along, the women would gather all of us half-caste children and we used to go walkabout amongst the sand hills around Lake Eyre and the only children that official parties saw on their visits to the camps were dark skinned children. The old 'Mulga Wire' seemed to have worked pretty well back then. Only Arabana was spoken there and strict tribal laws and customs were faithfully followed and observed. As a result, when it was decided that I and a lot of the other children should go to school after it was established at Finnis Springs Station by the United Aboriginal Mission from Adelaide, I could not speak a word of English. I was about five or six years of age at the time. In those early days, the school was in a large tent and the floor was just dirt. It was strange to all of us at first, but we got used to it. The government also agreed that all half-caste children attending school at the Mission at Finnis Springs would be exempt from the then policy of removal. In the beginning of my school years, we still had the ceremonies and corroborees and the faithful observance of strict traditional Aboriginal law and customs, but over the years these slowly diminished as the old people passed away.

I have memories of Finnis Springs that are happy and memories that are sad, memories that are of the school days, the ones of growing up there and the memories of days and events and of personal highs and lows, and of the voices and laughter of the old people. The thought came to me then, 'I wonder what they would say to me now'.

I live now at Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. I come back now and then and travel around in the old Country and camp at various locations on my own. Aboriginal people of whatever tribe have a fear of ghosts and there is a strong belief amongst all Aborigines that people who once lived in a land but who are now dead, still inhabit it in spirit form.

Consequently, Aboriginal people, including Arabana, often ask me, "Are you not afraid that as you sit alone beside your campfire one night that forms of dead ancestors might visit you?"

My stock answer is always the same, "At least, then, we will have a good conversation in Arabana!"

Yarnin' with Grandpa

A story of a little Aboriginal boy



Living out bush is all I can remember when I cast my thoughts back to my earliest memories of childhood. Running around naked (that is, without any clothes on) even in the coldest of winters, was considered normal by all young children back then. Oh, the adults used to put clothes on us fairly well most of the time; loose fitting little frocks that used to go down to the ankle for the girls and shorts that always seemed too big for the boys – always supported by braces! But the clothes didn't stay on too long, as we got rid of them as soon as we were out of sight. We never wore shoes of any kind and we were always getting prickles in our feet... but we didn't seem to mind because it was kinda fun digging them out! I don't remember getting cold feet in winter but in summer the sand used to get a bit hot and made us run a bit faster to the nearest tree or shady spot. The adults used to wear clothes of some sort all the time – well, there was an exception. An old man by the name of Anintyula never used to wear clothes. We children were all frightened and scared of him. He used to wear an oversized shirt that usually came down to just about his knees. He was a rainmaker, amongst other things, and had this fierce and glaring look... but he never harmed any of us kids, so I guess he was alright. Some of the adults were frightened of him, though, as it was said that he had enough knowledge and powerful magic to cause death to those he didn't like.



I don't recall us kids ever getting bored, as we always seemed to find plenty to do and in so doing, seemed also to get into all manner of mischief, much to the annoyance of our grown-ups! We mounted many a hunt for all kinds of beings, ranging from small bugs to large lizards, or large animals for that matter. I think many of us could track anything from the moment that we opened our eyes as babies. We hunted all manner of birds too. We used sticks and stones and would climb up trees to rob their nests of eggs. For some reason the adults didn't like us doing that too! Thinking back now, it is a wonder that we didn't get bitten by snakes, as we used to put our arms down tree hollows that we knew had bird eggs or young in it. Snakes used to

like bird eggs and young birds too!



We used to stage mock fights using spears that we made out of young tree saplings, and boomerangs that we made out of thick bark – freshly cut from a gum tree. Gangs of us would form sides and attack other gangs, and sometimes the mock fights got a bit serious. None of us were great swimmers, but we always took full advantage of waterholes that filled up from water coming down the creeks from any kind of decent rains that sporadically fell. We always enjoyed a good swim! And we used to play a game similar to tag. It gave us the chance to run fast and to be noisy and hyperactive. To escape our taggers, we used to climb and run up trees, laughing and shouting, and run along the branches like monkeys. It is a wonder that some of us didn't fall off and get seriously hurt, but I don't recall any incidents to that regard. This was mostly a tree game. Another game of skill that we used to play was with hard dirt. Thurru, we used to call it. The dirt or earth was a sort of clay that set like cement, especially under the hot outback sun, but it could be broken up into small pieces. We used to make shields, again out of freshly cut gumtree bark, or, as tin was around then, out of discarded pieces of tin. Then we formed into our usual gangs and, using the clods of dirt as weapons, tried to annihilate the other side. You had to be at the top of your mettle and concentration or you could get seriously hurt. You had to be able to twist and turn, jump and dodge, and to use your shield effectively to ward off any incoming missiles. After a while, you tended to develop a technique that made you skilful in this. Again, apart from a few bruises now and then, I don't recall anyone getting seriously hurt in this game. Of course, the adults used to threaten us with a hiding every time they caught us playing it. I remember a time once when one of our games was at its highest and everybody was engrossed and concentrating on the game when a couple of boomerangs landed amongst us. Of course, all activities came to a crashing halt and we all turned around to see what was going on. There was this old lady that we used to call Auntie Dolly screaming and yelling for us to stop and to go home... and she still had a couple of boomerangs in her hand. We kids all knew how good she was with those boomerangs. I mean, she could have taken our heads clean off with any one of those if she had wanted! We dropped all our pieces of clay and our shields and we bolted!



I spent all of my early years with my grandmother, Lily, at

Gudnampanha. There were a good number of Arabana people living there at that time. We used to attend a lot of corroborees there which were part of our social life. Some of them were serious and important where we kids had to be on our best behaviour, but most of them were staged for show and entertainment. Just about like going to the theatre or to the opera, really. I remember that we kids – girls and boys – had to sit in a specified place. The men and women always sat apart and we kids had to always sit with the women. We children had to sit with our faces to the ground before the corroboree started and were only allowed to look once the dances had actually started.



I used to go on many hunting and gathering trips with my grandmother. We would dig for a yam that formed from the root of a creeper-looking plant; Inka, we used to call it. The yam grew quite big and was kinda white. It was quite good to eat either raw or cooked in the ashes of a fire, where we cooked all our food. The yam grew to about the size of a small potato but as it was a root, sometimes we had to dig down more than two feet to get it. Of course, we also collected a lot of Yalka, which is a kind of wild onion about the size of a small pea. They were quite shallow, easy to dig for and very tasty! I remember one Yalka-digging trip with my grandmother. It was after one of our rare good rains, so we went just out of our camp a little way to see if the water had cut the ground when running away, making it easier to find Yalka. At the time I had two bung eyes that were quite swollen, and I couldn't see very well at all. I had been a bit lazy and had not shoed the flies away and the flies had attacked my eyes. Anyway, my grandmother was leading me around by the hand because I had cried to come regardless. We found a good site by the bank of a small creek and we all started to dig. All of a sudden, I got this big fright! Nobody else had noticed it but there was this big goanna, half dead from all the water that he had swallowed while being washed down by the flood with his mouth wide open because he couldn't move to run away. I almost fell over and I started crying again! Anyway, my grandmother killed it and we took it home and cooked and ate it.



I have a lot of memories of old Gudnampanha, a lot of them warm and happy and others a bit sad but they are all getting a bit faded now. Along with everything else, it was also a magical place and the Arabana people had been living there for hundreds of years. I remember one incident that

happened there that I can't explain even to this day. I have a younger sister who had reddish hair as a child – we used to call her Redwing. Anyhow, she was a bit spoilt and very wilful. She was about three at the time of this incident. It was almost on sundown and Redwing was throwing one of her tantrums to get her own way on something or other. She got so angry that she ran out of the camp in a temper. Did I tell you that Gudnampanha was situated beside a big, wide, tree-lined creek? It is quite near Lake Eyre. The North Creek, the Europeans call it, and we Arabana called it Karla Ngurru, 'the hard creek'. The head of that creek is a long, long way out west. Anyway, the creek had been flooding for over a week and was still running strongly. As it was getting dark, everybody was getting concerned for Redwing and started looking for her and found that her tracks led down to the creek. Now everyone was really worried. It was quite dark, and night had well and truly fallen. The search had gone on for about an hour when someone heard a child crying from the other side of the creek. A visitor – a Wangkangurru man – volunteered to swim the wide, swiftly flowing creek to see who it was. This man was from up Birdsville way where they have big wide rivers that flow fairly often, and swimming comes naturally to people from up that way. In this instance, he had to enter the creek some way up stream so the waters could carry him down to where the child could be heard crying, as it was flowing so strongly. It was indeed Redwing. Safe and sound! Everybody heaved a sigh of relief... but how did a three-year-old child cross that strongly flowing current of water and get to the other side? Well, I guess that that is one of life's little mysteries!

Grandpa's School Days



When we left Gudnampanha to go to school at Finniss Springs, we children were feeling a little apprehensive and sad because we didn't know what exactly was going on or what, really, to expect. We were leaving a lifestyle that, although tribal and totally different from European culture, was a lifestyle that we were familiar and quite comfortable with. Some of the adults in the community were saying that it was now the right path to take and it was the only thing left to do, while others said that it was the beginning of the end. In the final analysis, I think, both schools of thought were right. Anyhow, most of us went out to Country around Lake Eyre for one last walkabout for four or five days and then prepared to leave. It was not that we dreaded the thought of going to live at Finniss Springs – we considered it as home too, as we had relatives already living there and we also often travelled there to get government rations and to visit Country. No, it was just the thought of leaving the place that we had called home for such a long time.

Granny Lily stayed in Gudnampanha when the family left, which was a bit hard for me to take. However, she did move to Finniss Springs some time later but went and lived with her younger son, my uncle Fred. But as they were not living far away, I used to visit her often. Settling in was a bit difficult but making friends was easier because we mostly already knew everybody who was there. I couldn't speak English very well and got teased a fair bit about it, but in time, that was alright.

School was in a big marquee-type tent right beside the banks of the creek. It was sort of divided into two parts, one part for older kids and one for the younger ones. The floor was just dirt, and the tent was cold in winter and hot and dusty in summer. The floor had to be wet down with water to keep the dust down. We had wooden desks that had inkwells and we used to use wooden pens with nibs on one end to write with. Ink was mostly new to a lot of us and I remember getting it all over the desk and on my writing paper and mostly on myself, making the lady who was teaching us a wee bit annoyed. During the first few days, some of the girls put on tantrums and cried about having to go to school but we boys took it in our stride. Well, some of us, anyhow! There were no toilets. The girls had to go about two hundred metres down to the creek east of the tent, while the boys had to go

about three hundred metres west of the tent and over the hill... Bush toilets, like... you know.

In the beginning, whenever our mothers, aunts or grannies went out hunting during the week, we kids used to sort of forget school and take off behind them. We would get into trouble over that. Some of us boys often used to go off at recess time on hunting trips of our own or go down to the creek and play our games as we did at Gudnampanha and forget to come back. We taught the Finnis boys to do the same and the teacher called us troublemakers and a bad influence on the others. I don't know why. At that time, we only had one teacher. The Mission was in no way part of the Finnis Springs station property but was an entity of its own. My father worked as the station cook and there were both sheep and cattle on the property.

After we had been going to school for about a year, the Mission built a proper school. They made the bricks with the help of men from the local community and built it themselves with some expertise from people who came up from Adelaide. We kids loved it as it was cleaner and warmer than the old tent! After a while, Finnis Springs School really got going and was incorporated into the South Australian public school system.

I remember when there was a state-wide program in public schools, where they were giving out milk to children at recess time and we had milk given to us at our school too. The missionary, though, decided that as I was always a skinny kid, I was also to be given orange juice to build me up. True story! By this time, also, we had got into the grade system and everyone was more or less in their proper grade. At one time there, about thirty-six to forty kids were going to school. We had sports days and there was a basketball court marked out in front of the school in the dirt with hoops and all. Seeing that we always played in bare feet, I thought we were pretty good! We had sporting meets where we had other schools like Marree, Oodnadatta, and Copley come up and compete. We always competed well, held our own and did ourselves proud.

In addition to the milk and other programs the government was running at the time in public schools, the Mission had a program of its own. It decided, in its wisdom, to give the children breakfast in the morning and lunch at dinner time. Breakfast consisted of porridge made in a big pot and cooked in an oven which was situated in a room on the eastern end of the church building. It was the duty of some of us boys to get up early on school days to come in from our camps, light the fire and cook the porridge for the rest of the kids. Needless to say that breakfast was sometimes a bit late as some of us boys didn't like getting up early! Lunch consisted of split pea and

pumpkin soup, which I hated, and sometimes cheese and biscuits, which I also hated. This only lasted about a year, thank goodness.

The missionaries, husband and wife, both taught school on alternate days, leaving the other free to take care of the other tasks of running the Mission. They also got help from a teacher or teacher's aide who came up from Adelaide to take classes on occasions. I must say that most of us got pretty good grades so they must have been fairly good teachers. The husband, Andrew Pearce, was also an amateur dentist so he took care of our teeth as well.



School days were pretty boring, but we did have the odd exciting day.

Dingoes were a problem at Finnis Springs as they killed and ate the sheep on the station and sometimes, they killed the sheep just for fun. So any dingo that came onto the property had to be destroyed or exterminated. Mostly this was done by chasing the dingoes with horses. This day we were sitting in class, quietly doing our schoolwork and seeing that it was a hot day and we did not have air-conditioning, the main door was left wide open. Suddenly, this big dingo came running full pelt through the open doorway chased by several stockmen on horseback! Well, there was wild panic and great confusion with kids screeching and screaming and crying all at the same time. The kids were climbing onto desks and onto anything they could – screaming, screaming all the while. The stockmen eventually captured and collected the dingo and things settled down a bit. Something that I liked about it all, though, was that we got the rest of the day off!

Of course, being on the Mission meant also having to go to church, especially on a Sunday. In the early months of my starting school there, church was held down in the creek in the open air just below where our school tent stood. I remember where we used to get all spruced up with hair neatly combed and clean clothes and go down to the dusty, old creek to sing hymns and church songs under the gum trees with the dust and the flies. One old bloke used to wear a suit to church every Sunday. Neatly pressed and shiny as a pin! Again, a true story! God only knew where he got that suit from.

Eventually, a brick church was built by making the bricks locally, as they had done when building the school and all the buildings in the Mission complex. It was a great improvement. The Mission was non-denominational but leant more towards the belief and teachings of the Baptist persuasion.

We still had our corroborees at Finnis Springs, the serious and the not so serious, because we had brought with us the culture, if not the lifestyle, that we had had at Gudnampanha. The corroborees, though, gradually faded away but the old people kept and remembered our stories that had been handed down through hundreds of years and the old men still sang the old songs.



Like any community, I guess, we had emergencies that arose from time to time, particularly in health. I remember one time there where the whole school was quarantined for about three weeks due to an outbreak of something or other in the district. The health authorities sent a young nurse to monitor our health and general wellbeing for the duration of that quarantine. All of us kids loved her. We took her for long walks in every direction, showing her things like animals, birds, lizards, plants, grubs and even bugs. We tried to teach her how to track and taught her how to eat all kinds of bush tucker.

At the beginning of the quarantine, we all had to get an injection to be immunised from the disease. So, the whole thirty-six of us from the school all lined up at our first aid station to get our shots. We were a bit nervous because most of us had not got a needle before but as we stepped up in line to take our turn, we were talking tough. Suddenly, just in front of the nurse who was giving the injections, the line was broken. Someone had fainted and fallen down! Yeah... yeah... it was me. I hate needles.



The Flying Doctor Service was kind of new in our area at the time that I was going to school at Finnis Springs. I would like to say that it was (and is) a wonderful service which has greatly helped the people from the outback and has saved many lives out bush, including members of my own family. I remember the first time the Flying Doctor landed at Finnis Springs. A landing area had to be prepared and marked out. We had no grader or other equipment, so this was done by horses in harness dragging heavy equipment over the area to flatten it out. The landing strip was about a kilometre and a half west of the Mission on a flat, stony plain. We kids were excited and could not wait for the day for the Flying Doctor to come as we had never seen a plane land before, or seen one close up. The big day finally arrived, and we were in a high state of excitement all morning. There was no school as we were all given the day off. Nobody would have gone anyhow. All of a

sudden, the plane was there, circling the Mission and homestead. We were awestruck and, I am sure, rooted to the spot and staring with open mouths up into the sky. Then someone shouted, "It's going to land... It's going to land!" We all started running towards the airstrip. We had lost sight of the plane as it was still circling but we still kept running flat out. Suddenly, we heard this big noise right behind us and we turned and looked around – it was the plane coming in to land. It was directly above us and so close that we reckon that we could have touched it. Well... we panicked and instead of running towards the airstrip, some kids turned right and bolted towards the creek and some of us turned left and ran flat out to the safety of a mulga scrub. In the end, none of us saw it land. We did come back after it was on the ground... cautiously. It came many times after that, mainly on routine visits to conduct clinics and we got used to it. The serious cases were taken back to Broken Hill (which was the Flying Doctor's base) as were pregnant women. Many Finnis Springs people were born in the Broken Hill hospital.

Although most people were nervous about getting on the plane, there was one old man who was more than eager to try it out. He was our local Warpaya (wind man) which meant that he was responsible for and could control all the winds that blew. Sort of like a witchdoctor. His name was Indanantya (Jack Conway) and he was an interesting and very respected old man. Perhaps I could tell you more about him but that could be a story for another time. Anyhow, he had this very bad cold and was feeling very ill. The doctor gave him all the tablets and cough medicines and stuff and told him that if he followed instructions that he would be better in three or four days. The old man insisted that he was very sick and should be taken for a ride back to Broken Hill. When the doctor again reassured him that he would be alright, he became angry and stormed off saying that if he could not go then he would sing the plane so that it could not take off. The plane did indeed take off and flew back to Broken Hill without incident. Several days after, the Flying Doctor was responding to a call where a stockman had broken a leg in a fall from a horse on a cattle station near Oodnadatta in the north of the state. The plane was flying over Lake Eyre when it suddenly developed engine trouble and the pilot had to put down immediately. He landed on the edge of the lake and soon was hopelessly bogged and had to stay there for almost a week before the plane was pulled out onto solid ground by people from a nearby station using horses in harness. After safety checks, the plane then flew off as good as gold. Was it the result of old Indanantya's curse? Makes you wonder... huh?



Water was always a problem at Finnis Springs. Our annual rainfall for the region was only 125 ml (5 inches in the old scale). We had a dam about a kilometre south of the homestead where we also had two large collection tanks sunk into the ground. Of course, the water in the dam did not last very long. When the water in our collection tanks was depleted, we had to cart water by horse-drawn vehicles from a soak about twelve to fifteen kilometres east of the Mission, which kept us going until the rains came again. We didn't have water on tap at Finnis Springs. All the water used at home had to be carted by hand from the collection tanks a kilometre away. We only had eight-litre buckets and we had to make two or three trips a day. Often, we used yokes that consisted of a pole with a bucket suspended on either end that you carried over your shoulder. You know, like the Chinese use to carry things. Yes, water was indeed a precious commodity at Finnis Springs. We did not have showers but used a large tin bathtub to bathe in. My brother-in-law, Percy, built a 200-gallon cement water tank near our house and carted water to it from the dam. It saved us a lot of trips to the collection tanks near the dam.



Our house consisted of one big room – with no floor – made out of flattened out tar drums that were used to add bitumen to the roads. It kept us warm in winter; it sheltered us from the dust and wind and kept us dry from the rains when they did come. It was cold in winter and hot in summer. In the summer, though, my father used to build a bough shed next to the house, which he made from tree branches cut from the creek nearby. We passed most of the summer living in there, as it was cooler than being in the house.



I think that I told you before that Finnis Springs Station, where the Mission school had been established, had both sheep and cattle on the property. I remember how we children used to love shearing time at the station, which used to coincide with our winter school holidays. We kids used to love heading for the shearing shed and helping out in the yards or in the shed itself with the sheep. We were not allowed onto the shearing shed floor but we were always fascinated with everything else that was going on. Every 'smoko', there would be big billies of steaming hot tea brought over from the kitchen and heaps of beautiful, freshly cooked cakes that the men would share and give to us children to eat. Another thing that we kids used to like about shearing time was that it also was the time when the young lambs got their tails cut off. We used to gather up all the tails and take them home

and after making a great big fire to singe all the wool off, we used to cook them in the ashes of the fire. To us kids, it was a delicacy and we used to love them! A bit like going to McDonalds or something, I think!



At the time that we were going to school at Finnis Springs, there were also goats on the property. These goats did not belong to the station but to individual families that lived on the Mission. Someone once brought back a couple of goats and then other families, thinking that it was a good idea, began acquiring goats for themselves. I think that at one time there were a flock of over fifty goats there and they would wander around freely. My own family had about ten or more and people used them for fresh milk and, more importantly, for meat. Some people built yards for their own mob of goats but on the whole, the goats used to roam around in one big flock. When the owners and adults were not looking, we kids used to milk the goats into jam tins and then would go down into the creek and out of sight and make a fire and boil the milk. We would then let it cool and the cream would form on top... Boy, it was delicious! We also used to drink the milk straight from the goats' udders although we would get hidings from the adults if we were caught doing it. You know, I sometimes shudder and wince when I think of what we children used to do and get up to on old Finnis Springs.



There was not a problem with dingoes, as such, on Finnis Springs, although the property was right on the edge of Lake Eyre where there was a considerable population of dingoes. The sheep were mainly kept on the southern part of the property, while the cattle and horses were run on the northern and eastern part of the station. Cattle seem to be better able to cope with dingoes and were not bothered by them as much as the sheep were. Finnis Springs was outside of the government dingo-proof fence so did not have the protection that other sheep owners enjoyed but any wild dog that came onto the station was quickly dealt with and got rid of. They just had to be more vigilant all the time and keep a sharp look out for fresh dog tracks and the stockmen who worked on Finnis Springs were good at it.



I guess a lot more could be said about our school days and life in general at the Finnis Springs Mission. The kids who attended school in my time there are now old people and most who are alive today would have

many personal memories of those days. As children, we saw the passing of the tribal ways and traditions and the emergence of the Arabana people into the culture of the modern European lifestyle. I think that the old Arabana people, in their wisdom, saw the end of traditional tribal life as they – and our ancestors – knew it as inevitable, and saw the school and life at the Mission at Finnis Springs as a bridge for their children into the new world and lifestyle that had to be. For my part, I am grateful for having had the chance to attend the school at Finnis Springs and to acquire an education. I left school at an early age. One school holiday I went with one of my uncles who had a fencing contract. I was supposed to have stayed just for the school holidays and then come back to school but I joined a droving team instead, went up into Queensland and never came back.

Min Min Lights

Spooks and Ghosts



Many strange things happen out bush, so this yarn is going to be about mysterious and hard to explain happenings.

I don't know where to start this story. Perhaps a good place to start would be at Clifton Hills Station – or Seven Mile Bore, as we used to call it. It is a cattle station and I used to work there when I was a very young teenager. It is on the Birdsville Track, on the South Australian side of the South Australian and Queensland border. The homestead is situated on tableland country, overlooking the Diamantina River where it floods out in a wide area. You could see a long way from the station.

A Min Min is a mysterious light that a lot of people have various theories about. It is a light that doesn't throw any beam but just seems to float along doing its own thing. A bit like someone carrying a lantern, really. Mostly it travels slowly but can go fast too. Aboriginal people used to believe that it was the manifestation of the spirit of dead people. Anyway, the story goes that a long time ago, a man of Afghan descent tried to cross the river in flood just below the Clifton Hills homestead on horseback. Both he and his horse got swept away and he was presumably drowned because his body was never found or recovered. There is a grave about six or seven miles from the station going towards Birdsville, but this is the grave of a man of Indian descent who was reputedly an expert on snakes. Obviously, he picked up one snake too many because a snake bit him and he died and was buried beside the road. All of the Diamantina channel country is the home of the Inland Taipan, one of the most deadly snakes in the world. From the homestead at night we often used to see a light that seemed to travel slowly along the river from where the Afghan tried to cross the river to the Indian's grave up near the road. Nobody ever tried to investigate, and nobody travelled on the road of a night if they could avoid it, which makes the next little story a teeny bit scary...

We were mustering cattle at the time of this story, just around the homestead area, in preparation for branding calves. You put brands on cattle to identify them as belonging to the station. I didn't go out mustering this day because I had to stay and help with repairs to the branding yard. The

head stockman brought in a mob of cows and calves late in the afternoon with under two hours of daylight left in the day, but he had to leave a fellow worker under a tree with his horse about four miles west of the homestead because he had collapsed with sunstroke. Now this bloke was a new chum which meant that he was a novice and didn't know much about the bush. The sun had really got to him and he was in pretty bad shape. The manager jumped in his jeep to go and collect him and took me along to ride the horse back. When we got to the place the sun was almost going down and we loaded him into the jeep. 'No dramas,' I thought, 'I'll just gallop back home'. But when I got on the horse I found that he, too, was exhausted and I could barely get a trot out of him! I couldn't just leave him because he badly needed a drink and would have died of thirst during the night. So, I got off him and started walking, leading him along *that* road. It had become very dark and there was no moon – even the stars seemed to be hiding... I was very alert and my nerves were tingling and on edge and I was almost jumping at every sound. About two miles from the homestead, I decided to leave the road. If I had continued on the road, I reckon it would have added another mile or so to my journey. Instead, I decided to head directly towards the homestead but that also meant that I had to leave the flat ground and climb up and down through deep creeks and valleys to the tableland above. It seemed that I had been walking forever and, after a time, I thought that I was well and truly lost. At the next rise, I climbed back on the horse and, standing high on the stirrups, looked around searching for familiar land marks or to see if I could see the lights of the homestead... nothing... I was not panicking but, er... getting close! Then I remembered something that the local Aboriginals had told me. They had said that years ago, many Aboriginals had lived in the region and were buried in an area not far from the homestead. Now, if you ever get lost, they had told me, all you have to do is call out and they would answer and guide you home. Well... yeah... I was a bit nervous about that one... But I was getting desperate. So, standing high on the stirrups of the saddle again, and almost in a whisper, I called out "P-O!" (which is the Arabana equivalent of Coo-ee) and looked around and listened. No answer. So I called out again, just a little bit louder and listened... still no answer... so I got louder and louder until in the end I was shouting at the top of my lungs! No, the night was still. There was no sound whatsoever. So I got down from my horse and led him down into yet another valley and up the next rise and, just as I reached the crest of that rise, this big light hit me right in the face! Well, I nearly died. Every single hair on my body stood on end and I didn't know whether to turn and run or just drop down on my face! I couldn't do either, anyhow, because I reckon I was frozen to the spot. It seemed that I had stood there for an eternity until I suddenly realised that I

could see a pole with wires running from it in front of the light. It was part of the antennae in the station's communication network. The manager, worried that I was taking a long time getting home, had faced the jeep in my general direction and had turned the headlights on. Trouble was, the jeep had only one headlight that worked! I felt cold and shivery with relief.

When I walked into the homestead and let the horse go into the paddock, the manager asked me "Are you alright? Did you have any trouble?"

I replied, "No sweat, mate, it was a breeze!"



We also had a local ghost at the homestead itself. Every now and then, someone or something would drag a stick during the night across the tin wall outside of the quarters of where we used to sleep. But we got used to that and it never bothered us at all. Something like that used to happen also at Callanna, a sheep station just north of Marree. We workers used to all sleep in the saddle shed there and each night the last one in would throw the bolt on the door and lock it. But whenever we awoke during the night, we would always find the door unlocked and wide open.



My father used to take some time off his cooking job at Finnis Springs at about July and August every year to hunt dingo pups, something that he used to love doing. It is at this time of year that the dingoes have their pups and it was easy to get them. He, my brother-in-law Percy and I were out one year on one such trip with a mob of horses on the eastern side of Lake Eyre. A dingo scalp was worth one pound sterling each in those days and it was good money. I think one pound sterling would be worth about five Australian dollars in today's currency. We were way out in the desert at a place called Kelly's Bore. Grass for the horses was scarce so we went out about four or five miles west of the bore and made camp on a sand hill beside a swamp; dry, of course. The night was cold and we had a big fire going and we were sitting around it, drinking tea and yarnning. We could see a long way into the distance from where we were on the sand hill. We saw this light in the distance travelling towards where we knew there was a station homestead.

"Somebody's out late," my brother-in-law said.

To which my father replied, "Well, he has a long way to go yet then." We didn't take much notice after that but just sat around still talking.

Suddenly, from behind a large bush not far away from us, this big light came up. It was big and round like the moon but didn't throw any light.

“Min Min Light,” Percy shouted. I just dropped my mug of tea and dived into my swag which was close by. Percy grabbed the shovel and started throwing sand onto the fire to put it out.

My father was protesting, saying, “Don't do that. It won't harm you” and the light itself just went out as if someone had switched it off! It was my job each morning to go and fetch the horses. Next morning, my father couldn't get me out of bed, so Percy had to go and get the horses!



Another time, an uncle of mine had this contract to put up a fence around a property about forty miles up the Birdsville Track from Marree at a place called Clayton. It was the long break of the school holidays and he took his family up there with him from our home at Finnis Springs. I wrangled it so that my family let me go up there with them. We used camels as beasts of burden to haul fence posts and other gear to the fence line. There was a picnic race meeting in Marree one weekend and my uncle decided to go in, taking his family with him, and leaving me and another boy, Phil, together with an adult, Frank, to finish off some work while he was away. It was the next day and Frank had run out of cigarettes, so he decided that he too would go into Marree. We only had the camels in camp, so we got two and started into town that afternoon. There is an old homestead about halfway from where we were in Marree called Lake Harry where there is also a flowing bore to water stock. About a mile or so from this place as we were approaching it, we saw this car coming from Marree, but it had only one headlight. It turned into the homestead. “Good,” said Frank, “Now I may be able to get a cigarette”. When we got to where the bore drain crossed the road, we got off our camels and gave them a drink and then started to lead them down the road while Frank turned off to go up to the homestead which was over two hundred yards away. The moment that he turned to go towards the homestead, this bright light came on, full in his face, blinding him, and us, for that matter as we were not far away. The light was like a very bright torch. Frank thought that someone was having a joke with him and had a bit of a chuckle. The light suddenly went out and Frank found himself face up against a bushy tree. If he had taken another step, he would have walked right into it! Anyhow, he stepped around the tree and continued up to the homestead. Phil and I led the camels down the road a little way and sat them down, and as there was a cool breeze blowing, we sat and leant against them,

keeping out of the wind. Our eyes had become accustomed to the dark and after a time, we saw Frank coming back towards us with another man beside him, talking together as they walked.

“He’d be happy now that he probably has his cigarette,” said Phil.

We never took much notice after that until Frank was right near us saying, “Come on. Let’s go. There is nobody there.”

“But,” I said, “We saw someone there walking with you.”

“No,” He repeated, “I went right around the place and couldn’t find anyone.” So we jumped on our camels and took off as fast as we could. We went so fast that one of the camels became lame and we had to leave him beside the road and arrived in Marree all riding on one camel!



There are a lot of other stories that perhaps I could tell you, but these will do for now. Well, maybe this personal one for the last story. I have never actually seen a ghost or come into immediate contact with one, except for one occasion. This occurred in our railway house on McDonnell Street in Alice Springs. My son, Matthew, was about five, my daughter, Colleen, about three, and my youngest son, Norman, about one and a half.

Matthew and Colleen shared a room while Norman was next door in a room by himself. The children were supposedly sound asleep this night as I went to bed at about eleven o’clock, but no sooner was I asleep when I was awakened by the noise and din of children playing. I called out to them to stop playing and to go back to sleep. The noise of playing stopped immediately only to start up again five minutes after, louder than ever. Threatening them with all kinds of punishments, I got up to go and check on them but as I got out of bed, the noise stopped. When I got to Matthew’s and Colleen’s room, (the main culprits) they appeared to be asleep and it looked to me like that they had been sound asleep for a long time. ‘Ah ha,’ I thought, ‘I’ll trick them’. So I turned out the lights and shut the door of Norman’s room quite loudly, then I crept back to the door of Matthew and Colleen’s room and put my hand over the light switch so that I could switch it on quickly when they started up again. As I stood there in the darkness, I heard this noise behind me. It sounded like a pull toy being dragged across the lino. For some reason, all the hairs on the back of my neck stood up on end and I felt a cold shiver run through my body. Matthew and Colleen had this kid, about three years old, from next door who they played a lot with. They were inseparable. He used to have this little truck that he always pulled along behind him.

In fact, it was a sort of comfort blanket to him. The problem was though, there had been a fire in the house next door and it had burnt down about six months before this. Tragically, the little boy was trapped inside and had died in the flames. I put a mattress on the floor of Norman's room and slept with the lights on all night! Incidentally, we never had another visit from him or had any more trouble after that night.

Memories of Early Days



We have not sat down for a yarn lately, have we? I guess that is because there is not much happening on old Finnis Springs these days. The people who used to live there have all gone their different ways. Most of the old people have died and a lot of the younger ones too. The old place is deserted, and the old buildings are falling down. I go back every now and then to visit the old place and, although the memories are invariably sad, they are always good ones. These days, the old Finnis Springs pastoral lease and deeds are held by the South Australian Aboriginal Lands Trust. There was talk and speculation some time back that the old property might be made over into a national park but that has not eventuated. I recently went back to Finnis Springs to do a commentary in a documentary that someone was doing on the aspects of Mission life there and the memories and ghosts came crowding back.

The Arabana were a proud and noble people. They were confident and at ease with their laws, traditions and way of life and were happy with where they were in the scheme of things. In a way, Finnis Springs was the last stand where Arabana people practised the laws and customs as prescribed by the old Ularaka edicts and teachings and from where they looked after Country. In the end, though, they had to concede defeat to the European domination and demand for land, and to the way of life and culture of the newcomers. To survive, they knew that they had to find a way to fit in, as it were, and to that end, directed the younger generations towards the ways of the so called 'civilized' world of the Europeans, all the while keeping their pride in being Aboriginal and, although not practising it so much anymore, keeping alive in their hearts and memories the laws, traditions and the stories of the Ularaka of the old people that had been passed down for so many generations.

It was no surprise, then, to see how well Aboriginal people fitted into the landscape of the pastoral industry for, after all, it was land that they were familiar with. They were as one with the open countryside and were already knowledgeable in caring for Country and its animals, and soon adapted to what was required of them in their labours for the white man on the early pastoral leases of the colonial days. They soon learnt to ride the horses and to do the tasks and work required of them that made up the daily routine. The Arabana men of Finnis Springs, when I was growing up there as a child, were no exception. They themselves had mastered, more or less, their own

transitions and were comfortable living in two worlds. Their concerns back then were for the next generation and they had hopes that that generation would go one better than they had.



I do not recall when I first learnt to ride a horse. Perhaps it was as many bushmen used to say when talking of their own personal experiences: that I learnt to ride before I could walk. I do, however, have this recollection of an incident way, way back. We were going by horseback on a trip someplace. An uncle of mine was putting the packs on several horses but as he was packing one horse, the others would wander away so he had the bright idea of putting me on a horse and saying, “Boy! Keep these horses together.” I don’t know how old I was, pretty small. And guess what? The horses started wandering off again! The old horse’s name I can remember, it was Bacon. He was a gentle old soul. I was riding bareback, that is, without a saddle, so I started off at a trot to bring the horses back but we soon came to a small deep watercourse and old Bacon went to jump over it and I promptly fell off and under him! All I can remember now is looking up and seeing this great big horse’s hoof poised to come down on top of me and screaming my head off!



As it is with most Aborigines, my father was a bushman without peer. He could take you unerringly to any location in the bush or the desert even though he may not have been there for years. Yet, his brothers used to rib him, even in their old age, on how often and easily he used to get lost as he was growing up and had to be rescued many times. I could relate to this as my own brother Leonard used to get lost in a paddock! Yet he grew up to be one of the finest bushmen that you could ever want to meet. For that matter, all of us boys from Finnis turned out to be good bushmen. When I was young, every Aboriginal that I knew worked in the pastoral industry and us Finnis Springs boys were no exception. The minute that we left the Mission school, we took on the life of a stockman. We were naturals. We were all good horsemen and used to life in the bush and we could track anything. We could even track small lizards backwards in the sand on a hot day and if you think that is not hard, well, you just try it!

I guess that I could tell you about my life in the saddle as a stockman, but I reckon that would bore you. Mind you, I met a lot of interesting people and made a lot of good friends in the years that I spent in the stock camps of the outback. I worked on a lot of stations in South Australia but spent a lot

of time in Queensland working as a ringer on stations or on the road droving cattle. I even spent a little time working on sheep stations back here in South Australia but I always preferred cattle to sheep so I would roll up my swag and head up the Birdsville Track more often than not, heading for the cattle country.

I still remember my first droving trip. I was still going to school at the time. My father was good friends with the Greenfields who were a well-known pastoral family from western South Australia who held leases to half a dozen more sheep and cattle properties over that way. Colin Greenfield, who owned Billa Kalina station, asked my father to take a mob of store cattle back to that property from a railway siding about a hundred and fifty kilometres north of Finnis Springs. He had bought these cattle at a sale in the Northern Territory and was bringing them down by train to the rail siding at Coward Springs. Store cattle are cattle who are not fat and have poor physical condition due to having insufficient grass or fodder to eat. Anyway, when my father said that I could come, I was excited because at least I would be riding horses and be away from school for a few weeks. At night, we had to watch the cattle, that is, to ride around them after we had bedded them down for the night so they didn't stray and become lost. Everybody, including me, had a two hour watch. One night while I was riding around the herd and everything was quiet and the rest of the men were asleep, I happened to look down onto the ground. Imagine my surprise when I noticed these small glowing golden specks everywhere! I wondered what they were. I thought 'Could it be gold?' So I got off my horse and put a handful of dirt with the specks into a handkerchief that I had in my pocket and carefully tied up the ends. 'I'm gonna be rich,' I was thinking! When in the morning, I opened up my hankie to examine my riches, all that I could see was a lot of tiny little centipedes crawling around in the dirt in my hankie. Apparently, they become luminous at night and glow in a golden colour. I told my brother-in-law, Percy, who was also on the trip with us, about it and he laughed his head off. Some people have the weirdest sense of humour. I was not gonna share any of my gold with him, anyhow.

When we had delivered the cattle to Billa Kalina and to the stockmen there, instead of coming straight back to Finnis Springs, we went to a waterhole on the North Creek for a few days. It was (and is) a beautiful place with lots of tall trees and was like an oasis in the desert. It is more or less in a wide, open valley that the creek runs through with very tall gum trees that are about a hundred feet high that I reckon are relics of the days when Australia had vast forests. The Arabana name for the place is Yarri-Pulanha, which means 'two ears' but I have forgotten the legend that is connected to

it. It was said that it was the last place in Arabana Country that harboured a possum population, so I asked my father if there were any possums still living there and he said that there probably were.

So Percy and I had the bright idea of going to see if there really were and to hunt us up a possum. We armed ourselves with a tomahawk to cut open any hollows and went looking. Because possums are nocturnal animals, and it was daytime, of course we didn't see any. However, we did see some scratches on a tree trunk that suggested a possum might have been scrambling up and down it. Percy climbed up about 15 to 20 feet to a hollow that we could see from the ground. He couldn't quite see right inside it as it seemed fairly deep, with what appeared to be droppings around the edges of it. So he tapped the side of the hollow with the tomahawk and sure enough, there were sounds of something that moved in there. I have not seen a possum in my life and still have not seen one, so I came close to the tree and stood directly under where Percy was and told him to hit the tree again. When he did, there was definitely something making agitated noises in that hollow. "Chop it out," I called to him. "And throw the possum down to me." But when he started chopping, with a loud and terrified squawk, out flew this big white owl and as it left the hollow, it let go of a big white dropping and seeing that I was standing directly underneath the hollow and looking up, I copped it right in the face! Percy laughed so much that he nearly fell out of the tree. As for me, I couldn't see anything funny about it and stormed off to camp. And that was the end of our little possum hunting trip.



I mentioned before, working on South Australian sheep stations for short periods of times. One of those times was for Walter Greenfield, who owned Parakyliya Station – as a side note, Walter's brother Dave worked at the nearby Roxby Downs and they hated each other! It was there that I met an interesting old Aboriginal man whose name was Barney and he had been working there for some years. I have forgotten his Aboriginal name. He couldn't read or write but he knew a lot about mechanics, having taught himself, and he seemed to be able to fix any problems with cars. A sort of bush mechanic, if you like. And he had a wicked sense of humour. At one time there, Barney and I were given the job of inspecting and mending fences out on the run. We were riding along on a fence line one morning when we came to a wide open area that was covered by low bushes and grass. On this plain we saw a big grey kangaroo who was basking in the sun.

Barney turned to me and said, "Boy, see that kangaroo over there? I

bet you that I could go over there and grab him!” The kangaroo looked as if it was over six feet tall and big to boot.

“You are crazy,” I replied. “It would be long gone before you get within a hundred yards of it and even if it did stay around long enough for you to grab him, it will surely kick you to death.”

“I am going to sing him,” he stated.

“Sing him? Barney! Barney!” I scoffed.

Getting off his horse and handing me the reins, he said “Just watch. I can sing any animal”. He was down wind of the kangaroo and walked slowly and silently towards it while keeping his eyes on the kangaroo and keeping up a low Aboriginal chant. He was more than halfway there when the kangaroo, perhaps sensing that something was amiss, sat up and looked around. I had a grin about a mile wide across my face, thinking ‘Barney, you are going to need a bit of magic now. That old roo will soon be long gone!’ Barney was now starting to stop and stand still for a few seconds at a time to let the kangaroo settle before going on again, while keeping up his low chant and getting ever closer. The kangaroo, although looking a bit confused, didn’t seem that worried. When he got to ten or fifteen yards and the roo still had not moved or hopped away, my smug grin quickly disappeared. ‘Hey,’ I thought, ‘maybe he really can sing animals!’ Imagine my amazement when he got to less than six feet from the kangaroo and it stood up straight, more or less on his toes, in an agitated state seemingly not knowing what to do. It looked huge from where I was sitting on my horse and I was impressed with Barney’s performance. It was then that Barney decided to lunge forward to grab him but at the same instance the roo jumped too but in his confusion, he leapt towards Barney and they collided in mid-air, knocking each other over in the dust. The kangaroo scrambled up but fell over a few times before hopping away. Leading Barney’s horse, I quickly galloped up, thinking that he was badly hurt only to find him rolling around on the ground in laughter. The kangaroo was stumbling around not far away, and it was only then that I realised that it was totally blind! Barney had worked on Parakylia for a long while and had seen that old roo many times before and knew that it was blind. Well, he certainly had me fooled and I was starting to believe him too! We both had a good laugh. Old Barney certainly was a character and people tell many stories about him and I could tell a few myself but perhaps that will be for another time.

Walking Traveller



Although nomadic by nature, Australian Aborigines always had a particular place, a particular area, where they lived semi-permanently. It was a special part of the Country that they called home, a place they identified themselves with and where they preferred to be in the good times and the bad. For us Arabana people, this was Gudnampanha. Although we travelled and walked around a bit, and felt at home and comfortably familiar with places that we travelled to or passed through, it was Gudnampanha that we always came back to. It was our home. Many old Aboriginal people, especially those in poor health who thought that their time to die was close to hand, always tried come back to the place that they considered home. ‘To die amongst family,’ as the old people used to say.

Many people have asked me how we used to travel and what our campsites actually were like. Well, we travelled quite simply. We walked and our food and other possessions were carried on our backs or in our hands. Many women, especially the older women, carried their possessions on their heads and would carry them like that all day. That is how Aboriginal people moved around in the old days before the event of Europeans. This was how things were in my time too, travelling and walking around with Granny Lily. People used to travel around confident in the knowledge that they could find water and food when it was seasonally available and that included ‘bush tucker’ (vegetable foodstuff), as well as meat (game). In drought times, people didn’t move around as much. They stayed at places where water was more or less permanent and where game came to drink, and people were only forced to move when all these resources dried up. Other people also have wondered how Aboriginals coped in adverse weather conditions like, for instance, winter. Aboriginals didn’t travel around when it was really cold or when weather conditions were bad unless they had to, for instance, when going for special occasions like ceremonies. They stayed in semi-permanent camps where they built shelters like humpies or lean-tos, until the weather stabilised. Sometimes, they sheltered in caves, but not very often as Aboriginals believed that caves were the homes of spirits, as were certain parts of creeks, especially around waterholes. While travelling we used to build windbreaks made from the branches of trees at our nightly camps and, in winter, slept beside a fire that we kept going all night. This was

how things were in the old days and more or less in my time too. However, as European amenities were already here, some people preferred to use the white man's blankets whenever they could get them but because of their bulkiness, they didn't carry too many of them. We young children were carried on the backs of teenage girl relatives or other female relatives but made to walk whenever we were able to. It was mostly women who travelled around together in hunting and gathering trips and holding ceremonies, and when the husbands did come along, they usually went off doing their own thing somewhere else. The women carried all of the family possessions and the provisions. Mostly, Aborigines travelled around in small family groups, but when there was a long journey, everybody travelled as a family with women, as usual, carrying the possessions and men doing the hunting to provide everyone with meat during the trip. That was how Arabana people moved about within their Country in the old days, but the coming of the Europeans vastly changed all that. Aborigines learned to accept and adapt to the changing lifestyle that the white man brought.

For instance, the white man taught the Aboriginal man how to ride a horse when pressing them into service on their station properties, and that act alone had an immense impact on Aboriginal culture. Aborigines began to gradually get a few horses together themselves and used them for transport and to hunt game like kangaroos by chasing them down on horseback. Oh, they still walked as they did in the old days but the culture of moving around by walking was never to be quite the same.

With the horse came the buggy, which was a vehicle with four wheels, drawn (pulled along) by two horses in harness with a pole between them. I don't know how they acquired them, but when I was a child, a few Aboriginal families owned buggies. My father had one. Oh, yeah, we still walked as we had previously, but every now and then we would take along the buggy and the horses. The men, of course, used to drive the buggy, so they came along too and travelled around as a family unit. It made carrying easier as you could then put the blankets and provisions up onto the buggy. Women still carried things like digging sticks and had the usual bag strapped across their back to carry any lizards or any other bush tucker that they might pick up along the way. And kids still walked, although we schemed a few ways whereby we could get onto the buggy by pretending to be sick or pretending to have a sore foot or a sore leg and thereby not being able to walk.

A unique travelling culture developed around the buggy. At the overnight camps, it was the men who arose early in the morning to relight the fires and put the billy on for breakfast. After having something to eat

for breakfast, the women would then just walk off from the camp, taking the children with them and leaving the men to pack up all of the gear and extinguish the fires. The men would catch up with the women and children about midmorning, stop to boil the billy and have something to eat, and then go on and make the next camp, to which the women would arrive in the late afternoon. This is one way that Aboriginal culture adapted to the advent and the influence of Europeans and their ways.



There was an etiquette when travelling between communities, also. You just could not enter a community whenever you wanted to, no matter what time of the day it was unless, of course, you were a resident and lived there on a day to day basis. For the travellers, the rule was that you had to stop about two or three kilometres before reaching the camp, attract the attention of the inhabitants, and make them aware of your presence and your intentions of entering the camp. The method you would use was smoke signals. Aboriginals were very adept at reading smoke signals; they could tell almost with a glance whether the smoke was coming from something normal, like an outbreak of a bushfire or grass fire, or was, in fact, man-made. Different species of trees and shrubs, even grasses, make different kinds of coloured smoke, enabling Aborigines to send different kinds of messages. I used to know how because I was once part of the lifestyle, but I was young then and my memory fails me now. One method was to light a large fire, pile green boughs from trees on it to make the smoke, suppress it by using branches, and then quickly take the branches away to create puffs of smoke. This seems to be a universal method, as I think the American Indians used this kind of smoke signal too. Australian Aborigines used branches from many kinds of trees and shrubs to make different kinds of coloured smoke, to send the right kind of message that they wanted to communicate. There is also a shrub in the bush that when dry and when used as firewood does not produce smoke, or hardly any. It is handy to know about if you didn't want anyone knowing of your presence and you needed a small fire to cook something or to keep warm. Upon seeing the smoke, somebody would come out to meet you and more or less welcome you and to tell you where you could set up camp. But that was not the end of it. For a lot of reasons that I won't mention here, you had to wait and enter the camp only on or after sundown, and with the Arabana, on a westerly or north-westerly approach. Too bad if you arrived at about mid-day! But you then spent the time hunting, foraging and cooking so you would be able to take food into the camp to share with the locals. Thinking back now, I realise how immersed in rituals Aborigines

really were, particularly the Arabana. For instance, the simple entrance into a permanent established camp by travellers was deeply imbued in ritual. The travellers had to enter as quietly as possible, go directly to the site where the persons who had met them told them that they could go and they had to stay together. This is in spite of the fact that some of the travelling folk may have close relatives who were inhabitants of the camp.

The inhabitants could go about their normal business but mostly stayed within the environs of their camp so as to allow the travellers direct and unimpeded access to their allotted camp site. The locals had to maintain silence and to keep their dogs from barking. Although excited and eager for news from the visitors, etiquette demanded that the locals were not to call out or make contact with them and, again, not to approach the visitors' camp when they were settled. It was the travellers themselves who after settling down in their camp, went to visit friends and relations in the camp properly. Locals had to wait until the sun rose the next day before they could visit. If there was a man of importance in the travelling group, such as a lawmaker (wilyaru), then the rules were strictly enforced. The group came into the camp in utter silence and no one was allowed to move around. Not a single dog barked. And what amazes me, now that I think back on it, is that not one of the travellers' dogs barked too. Again thinking back, I can remember as a child 'hearing' that silence. All you could hear was the tramp of weary feet and if there were horses and a buggy in the group, the jingle of harness. True story. We observed, now I think back on it, a lot of rules, rituals and regulations back in those days without giving it a thought. It was just part of the way we lived. Our everyday lives were governed by rules and rituals. It might be good one day to investigate that theme further but that could be for another time.

Beliefs, Rituals and Smoke



I was yarning with my granddaughter just the other day about the subject of rituals. I had never given the subject much thought, but I guess that rituals virtually governed the lives of Aborigines from the moment they were born. I think that it certainly governed mine. I was born under a mulga tree in a small humpy that was built for that specific purpose some distance from the main camp. Female relatives and friends attended my mother. There were rituals involved in the cutting and tying of the umbilical cord and other stuff, but I could never find out any information about it. It was women's business and they made sure that it remained that way and kept it top secret. However, there is a ceremony that I could tell you about and that is the smoking ceremony. Smoke played a big part in Aboriginal customs and lore in the old days of traditional life. Modern day Aborigines, I think, put a false interpretation on the meanings and functions of smoking ceremonies because, firstly, they have lost touch with Aboriginal culture and knowledge and therefore don't exactly know and are genuinely mixed up and, secondly, today's Aborigines use these ceremonies politically, that is, they use them to promote their own agenda, thoughts and ideas with false information and knowledge. To the Arabana, as it was with most other tribes, I think, a smoking ceremony was the signal of something ending and of something new beginning. A new phase in life, if you like. So, if the women held a smoking ceremony for a newborn baby, it signalled the end of the nothingness from whence the baby came to a state of awareness of the world around him (or her) and the sensation of being alive. A smoking ceremony was mostly held for a boy child and was not a regular ritual. Sometimes it was held and sometimes not. It was entirely optional and was usually a small ceremony attended mostly by female friends and relations.

Smoke played a large part right through a male person's life. When a young boy ended his initiation rituals and was brought back to the camp and everyday tribal life, he was sat down in front of the people in the smoke of a ceremonial fire. This was to signify that he had passed the stage of boyhood and now was a man and an adult in his own right. There was also a marriage ceremony where a man sat in the smoke of a ceremonial fire, with his wife to be, to signal the fact that he was taking on the role of husband, protector and provider for a family. Then again at his death and burial, a fire was lit so

the smoke blew over his open grave. This was to do two things. Firstly, to entice his spirit into the grave and then to signal the end of his life on earth.



Arabana used rituals and beliefs to do a lot of social and practical community services. For instance, take this story that the old people used to tell us. When an Aboriginal person cooked something, they made a fire so that they could have lots of hot coals and ashes then buried whatever they were cooking in a hole within these hot coals. When it was cooked and they pulled it out, it usually left a large hole. Arabana people believed that if you didn't fill that hole in, then your next baby would have trouble and the umbilical cord would wrap around the neck and strangle the baby. The practical side of this belief was that there were always small children around the fire in a camp and they could accidentally step into that hot hole and badly burn their feet. So covering up that hole with its hot coals and ashes prevented this and removed the danger. Another belief was that no young person could eat the last half of a kangaroo's tail. Now this is the tastiest and juiciest part of a kangaroo's tail. However, if there were old people in the camp and a young person were to do this, then that young person's hair would instantly turn white and grey! The practicality of this legend was that old people were guaranteed access to food and did not go hungry. Yet another story was that you could not leave any food scraps, like animal and lizard skins and bones, lying around your camp. This was particularly so with ends of lizard tails. The belief was that lightning in the next thunderstorm would strike at the bits and pieces (especially the ends of the goanna tails) and could inadvertently kill you. The practicality of this belief was that it kept the camp and the environment clean of rubbish.

In the old days, there were no houses, and for that matter, no beds as we know it today. Everybody slept on the ground in the open under the stars. Most of us kids had this bad habit of lying on our backs and staring up at the moon. The old people used to tell us that if we did this too often that the moon would come down from the sky and cut our heads off with his boomerang. This scared us, because staring at it for a long time like that really does give the impression that the moon is actually moving and coming down! Scary! It often got us to roll over and shut our eyes and go to sleep (so the moon could not see us anymore). Another belief was that when a person saw a newborn baby for the first time, they would touch the soles of the baby's feet with their fingers. This was to ensure that they and the baby would always be part of the same community and would never be far apart. People would always do this with their family and relations' babies and also

with those of their friends.



Today, many Aboriginal people consider smoke as something that is, somehow, purifying and sacred. Indeed, many distinguished and knowledgeable Elders and leaders from many tribes and communities espouse this contention and say that it has always been part of their customs and beliefs. As a person who was born into and has been deeply immersed in Aboriginal culture and tradition since infancy, I must say that this has not been my experience. I have no doubt that many Aborigines and people from different tribes make use of smoke for various reasons in their functions and ceremonies today. I personally contend that the meaning and the implication of the smoking ceremony has been lost and has changed in the last two hundred years or so of European settlement. To consider smoke as something holy is not an Aboriginal concept and is indeed alien to the Aboriginal way of thinking and original traditional beliefs. I think this comes from the fact that the first contact that was made of Australian Aborigines was on the northern Australian coastal regions. This contact was made mostly by people who were of the Catholic faith, or similar, who, in their own rituals, used smoke in the form of incense as something holy. I think this belief and practice then slowly filtered down and spread through the tribes and Aboriginal communities up north and then down to the central parts of Australia where perhaps today it is considered by some as traditional Aboriginal culture. I know that this was not so with the Arabana. The Arabana had unshakeable faith and belief in their Minparu – doctor men, if you like, men who had contact with and regularly dealt with spiritual matters. Take, for instance, the wide-held belief that most Aborigines have today of driving out the spirits of dead people by using smoke in the houses and places where they have died. The so-called practice of ‘smoking houses’. The old Arabana Minparu of yesteryear would treat this practice with disdain within their own community as they firmly believed that they themselves had the power and the expertise within their own bodies to deal with any contingency and the mere moving on of spirits or removal of malevolent influences would have been just matter of fact to them. Anyhow, to each his own, as the saying goes, and if there are people who believe that smoke is holy and has a lot of these qualities, well, more power to them, I say.

Grandfather and the Kartha Kartha Men



In our most recent yarns, we have talked about general beliefs with maybe a bit of superstition thrown in! Arabana, as I think most Aboriginal people in Australia did, fervently believed in all things spiritual. In the Arabana way of thinking, it was the spiritual endeavours of the ancestors of long ago that created the world in all its forms and it is that supernatural influence that maintains the distribution and balance of nature in the physical world as we know it today. The Arabana believed that the long-dead ancestors passed on to their ancestors – man, and in this case, the Arabana – the ability and the knowledge to manipulate and stage manage the spirit world by the ceremonies and rituals of the Ularaka, and to use this vast resource for the benefit for the Arabana tribe and even for personal endeavours. It is no surprise, then, to know that the Arabana believed passionately in the supernatural, of which many stories abound but of which, unfortunately, I can recall but few in their entirety.

Take for instance, the story of the big black dog with the piercing red eyes that roamed around only at night. This story comes from Gudnampanha. I was working on the Railways at this point in time at the Curdimurka railway siding, about three or four kilometres east of Gudnampanha. It was a Saturday and, therefore, a day off work. There was a group of stockmen from Stuart Creek station at the Gudnampanha Springs branding cattle at the stockyards there. Being well-versed in stock work ourselves, plus the fact that we personally knew every stockman on Stuart Creek Station, a friend and I went down to give them a hand as we had nothing much else to do that day. My friend's name was Syd, too, but we all used to call him 'Sidee Boy'. We stayed down there with the stockmen all day, branding cattle and riding and shoeing horses. We enjoyed fresh prime steak for supper that night and stayed yarning late into the night. My friend and I were young and in our late 'teens, you know, about 17 or 18 years old. Anyhow, as I said earlier, it was very late when we decided to go back to the Railway Quarters. It was a dark moonless night and one of the stockmen lent us a torch to take home to light our way. Of course, there was a lot of general banter and talk of the old black dog and we were told to keep a sharp look out. We stated that we were not

worried and could handle it and, in fact, did not believe in that old legend.

The first kilometre or so was okay, as it was open, flat country, but after that, our path had to cross about three hundred yards of very dense scrub and also a bushy creek and then climb a steep embankment on the other side which brought us about a kilometre from our destination. Well, we were walking along, talking and joking, until we came to the part where the bushes grew tall and close together, then we stopped talking and walked in silence. We had crossed the creek and were almost through the scrubby bit when we first heard the sound in the bushes. So we stopped dead and listened but could not see or hear anything, so continued on our way. All of a sudden there was that noise again, only louder... So we froze and looked around and listened. Again, we could not see or hear anything, only the tall grasses and bushes all around us. So we started off again but slowly and cautiously this time. The noise this time was loud and clear and seemed to be right beside us! Sidee Boy, who was carrying the torch, shone it all around again and there was this great big pair of red eyes looking straight at us from about ten yards away! We both let out a yell and Sidee Boy threw the torch at it in panic. I was walking behind Sidee Boy but I was past him in a flash as we both took off running and simply flew up that embankment. Behind us we could hear the bushes and shrubs being broken and smashed by something huge. We ran the distance to the Railway Quarters in nothing flat and I am quite sure that we both broke the four-minute mile. Next morning, we were both a bit shaken still but were having a bit of a laugh. We were quite sure that what we had encountered was indeed the old black dog. The sun was shining and it was a bright sunny day and we were our brave selves again. However, we were egging each other to go back to the creek to retrieve the torch. I said, "Go on, Sidee Boy, go and get that torch because Roy had lent it to you, and he would want it back". But he said that I should go. In the end, though, we both went. We found the torch besides the creek where we had thrown it and amazingly it was still switched on, but the light was very dim as the batteries were going flat. And we discovered that what we had thought had been the old black dog had indeed been a small mob of cattle that had been sitting asleep on the banks of the creek and had jumped up in panic and stampeded ... Dumb animals!



When I moved from Gudnampanha as a child to go to school at Finnis Springs, for a time I used to sleep in a tent with my brothers. Sometimes in the middle of the night while my siblings were fast asleep, I had this conception of being visited by other small children who were

the same age as I was and we used to have a great time playing in the flat and in the creek near our place. They were not kids from the community but were from somewhere else. As it happened over many weeks, I can't actually say that I was dreaming. I tried to tell my friends at school about them, but they only laughed and said that I was mad; I even tried to talk to my close family about them but with the same result. However, one of my Aboriginal grandmothers listened quietly and patiently and I can still recall her gentle response and advice to this day. She said this to me in Arabana, "Don't worry, dear grandson, and do not be afraid. Enjoy their company while you can because as you grow older, they will all go away, and you will not see them again". She proved to be right because soon after, those children stopped visiting me.

Arabana held this belief in beings that presented as children and who frequented Aboriginal camps. I, myself, have not personally seen any during daylight hours but many have reported seeing them and this includes two of my own brothers who reportedly played with them in normal boys' games. The strange thing about all this, though, is that the boys who the beings are playing with do not see them but children at some distance away do. These beings seem to play mostly with boys and hardly with girls. Arabana regarded these beings as neither bad nor evil but greatly mistrusted them as they were worried that they would take the children away from the camp in their play and that the children then would get disorientated and lost.

I must say here that the subject that we are presently discussing is highly controversial. Some Arabana believe in the existence of these beings while others don't.

I am only saying of what some ordinary Arabana swore that they have seen and witnessed. I can't recall any specific name for these beings except the usual Ampaka, which described a magical being of any size (mostly small) and description which could be just plain pesky or downright evil and who could appear and disappear at will. One of my relatives did give them a name. He called them Kartha Kartha Men. A kartha kartha is a small brown lizard with a rough, scaly skin that lives solely on the hot, stony plains of the outback.

One of my uncles, Tommy Thompson, used to tell this story about an incident that he witnessed. It was a lazy, hot afternoon and he was lying and resting on his bunk, on his veranda. His house was built there on the side of the hill, facing the Mission complex down on the flat. He had a clear view all the way down to the Mission houses, which were a little more than a hundred yards away. His family were all indoors, and as the weather was

hot, there was nobody else moving around in the community. What attracted his attention was the noise of something being rolled on the hard ground. He rose on his elbow and saw that it was a small boy kicking an empty jam tin along. He didn't recognise the boy and decided that he may have been from a family of visitors to Finnis Springs. The boy was having great fun and laughing loudly as he kicked the jam tin along. Uncle Tom was highly amused and was rapt in the boy's antics as he watched and could not help laughing out aloud himself when the boy went to kick the tin and missed and fell heavily on his bottom. The boy quickly looked up at Uncle Tom's laughter in panic and dismay and promptly disappeared! Uncle Tom was himself startled and swore to the day that he died that this was a true story.

Minparu



In one of our recent yarns, we talked a bit about the Minparu (also known as Mintalpa), the doctor man or witchdoctor, if you like. I can remember some few of these old men from my younger days. They were an essential part of Aboriginal society way back then. People believed absolutely in their power to heal or to change everyday events, and also in their power to cause death. In the old days, Minparu had to undergo strenuous training and initiation before they qualified as witchdoctors. I could discuss the rigours of that training here, but I think I will let it pass. Most were gentle men, soft-spoken and dedicated. In modern day times, I think those who pass themselves off as witchdoctors are self-appointed and do not have any formal training. It was, in the old days, an entirely male profession although there were a few women about with one major difference. Men witchdoctors treated everybody while women only treated women and children. When I was a child, I remember one old man that stood out. Everybody respected him, everybody feared him, and he had a reputation for being very good at what he did. Neighbouring tribes both hated and feared him but went out of their way not to anger him. He was a gentle, old man with piercing eyes, and he had a lot of success in curing people, but he unfortunately also had a reputation of causing death. His name was Mara Madlanthi, which means ‘bad hand’, and Europeans knew him as Tom Calf. Here I think I’d best explain how a Minparu worked. They worked by passing their hands over your body to find out what was making you sick. And then pulling out from your body, objects such as fashioned pieces of bone, complete with strings of human hair attached together with such things as small stones and even blood, and all this without leaving a mark or a break in your skin. If that was sleight of hand, then they were very good at it because you could never see what was happening, only the result. The important part was that the patient invariably got better almost immediately. The Minparu always gave good practical advice and they were good psychologists. I remember working on a station near Oodnadatta once. It was summertime and some people had gone out hunting that morning. In those days, there were a few Aboriginal families, although not actually working on the station, who lived at or around the station. Anyway, a couple of kids came up to the station homestead one day at around about mid-day to see an old man who was resting on a bunk on the veranda of the workmen’s hut. They told the old

man that 'spirits' had got one of the women of the hunting party and that she was very sick. Could he come down straightaway and see her? He quietly asked them questions and listened to them for a while. He then said, no, he couldn't come down right now because it was too hot and that he was not feeling that well himself but promised to go down later that evening. Now this old man could not read or write and had probably never seen the inside of a white doctor's surgery in his life but he then proceeded to give those kids instructions that could have easily have come straight from the pages of a first aid book. The instructions and advice were for sun stroke. He did go down later that evening and his instructions had been faithfully carried out. He did his usual thing and produced some small stones and stuff from her body and the next day the woman was feeling decidedly better. He also told her to cover up the head and neck when walking around in the sun because that is where the 'spirits' entered your body in the summertime and also to wear loose clothing.

As I said earlier, old Tommy Calf, Mara Madlanthi, was the main Minparu when I was young and at Finnis Springs. I remember how he almost got me killed once. I was working for a short time at Billa Kalina station and had taken time out from school. We had taken three or four station horses to the Kingoonya picnic races. I had gone there with my brother-in-law, Percy Dodd, who was also working on the station for a short time. My father had been on the station too but had gone back to Finnis Springs. Anyway, I met my uncle Syd there at the races. It was the very first time that I had ever seen him, and he said to come around and meet his family, my aunt and cousins. I was a bit scared, though, to follow him back to his camp because there were a lot of Aborigines around and they were all strangers to me, so I said "No, I'll see you later". I wandered around the race meeting and suddenly bumped into old Tommy Calf. I was happy to see a familiar face so I stayed with him for a while. Then, unfortunately, I got caught up in an incident. A group of local Aborigines had accused old Tommy of causing the death of a twelve-year-old boy and they wanted to talk with him. So he went out to their camp about two miles east of Kingoonya to talk to them, taking me along with him. Being young at that stage, when we got there I had to sit with the kids while the adults sat around in a circle talking to old Tommy. The group consisted of both men and women. They would pick up a handful of dirt when they were speaking and passed this handful of dirt on to the next person so that person could have a say. The discussions were very animated and lively and old Tommy was denying everything saying that they had simply got their facts wrong and that it was all innuendo. Tempers were getting frayed and the voices were getting raised higher and higher

and I was getting worried as this went on for some time. In the end, old Tommy had had enough and when he next had the handful of sand and it was his turn to speak, he stood up and threw the dirt into the centre. Then he calmly called to me, using my Aboriginal name, and turned and walked off. I anxiously jumped up and quickly followed him, fully expecting a spear in my back at any moment. I couldn't get up too close to him, nor could I go past and get in front of him because I couldn't come into physical contact with him because he was a Minparu and that discipline is drilled into your blood from when you were a baby. Old Tommy walked upright, calmly and with purpose, while all I wanted to do was run! The Minparu of old really knew what they were doing because for example if you had a sickness that could not be cured, like cancer for instance, then they would tell you that you had a white man's disease and to go and see a white doctor. The Minparu never asked to be paid but you always gave them something in the form of a gift of something or other.



Certain other old men, not necessarily witchdoctors, also had power over the elements. I can remember during the late thirties, there being a big drought and the country was very dry. The wind from the south used to blow sand all day long and when it did, one of these old men would go out into the flat in front of his camp in the late evening. He would paint his body with ochre and put eagle feathers on parts of his body and putting emu feathers on his ankles, would dance into the wind to stop it blowing. He also held eagle feathers in both hands as he danced. Just at sundown every day, the wind would stop blowing. We always believed that was due to his incantations.



Other people besides witchdoctors could also cure you from many things. I remember once when I was working as a stockman up on Clifton Hills station when the Brookes family from Adelaide owned it. The neighbouring station of Innamincka, which is on the Cooper Creek, was doing a cattle muster and requested that some stockmen be sent over from Clifton Hills to join the muster and to bring back any of our cattle that had strayed onto the neighbouring property. In those days, there were no fences between properties. In reply to the request, our manager sent three of us to join the muster. It was quite a long way and it took us about two or three days to get there. When we arrived at the meeting place near a big waterhole on Innamincka, it was very late at night and as we were very tired, we just put our swags on the ground and went to sleep. However, I kept waking up

during the night because I seemed to be lying on something hard, such as a rock, but as I was very tired, I put up with it until morning. In the morning when I rolled up my swag, I found that the object that had been worrying me all night and what I had been sleeping on was something white and round. I dug it up and soon realised that it was a human skull. Apparently, a lot of people had died from an epidemic there, derived from European explorers and settlers, to which they had no immunity, swept through the Aboriginal tribes and killing them in great numbers. In fact, it was so severe a disaster that the survivors just simply walked off leaving the dead in the humpies where they had died because they just could not cope as they themselves had been weakened by the disease. After I had touched that skull, I became sick and was really sick for four or five days. I couldn't eat, I had the sweats, could not eat and generally felt poorly indeed. Oh, I put on a brave front for a few days but the others in the stock camp could see that I was unwell. I genuinely believed that the spirit of that dead person had entered my body and, as a result, I was going to die. I was listless and weak and was like that for a number of days. Fortunately for me, there was an old man working at that stock camp at that time who, although not being a witchdoctor, had certain powers. He kindly used those powers to restore my health and to expel the dead man's spirit from my body. He did all the necessary things for me like singing the songs and rubbing me with emu fat and administering to me with his hands. I was very grateful to that old man and still remember him to this day. I think that this is the ultimate definition of the power of belief that all Aborigines had in my day and the effect that it had on our lives. Arabana were always respectful and never touched human remains as they believed that to be a very dangerous thing.

Another example of this was later when I was actually working at Innamincka. I had just bought myself a brand new pocket knife. My job at that stage was to watch a mob of cattle that we had already mustered and drafted while the other stockmen were out mustering more cattle. I had the herd spread out and grazing on the plain beside a big sand hill and I was on that sand hill, overlooking the herd. I was dismounted and walking, just leading my horse and throwing my pocket knife into the ground to amuse myself. On this occasion, when I threw it and went to pick it up, I found with horror, that it had landed near the skeletal remains of a human hand. I reckoned that it was the site of an old grave that the wind had disturbed, so I just left my knife there. I wouldn't even pick it up because I believed that if I did then I would have got sick.



Another man of importance at Finnis Springs in my school days was an old man by the name of Anintyula, which meant 'rain maker', and he was responsible for making rain. Old Anintyula didn't like wearing clothes but would just wear a shirt only and all of us kids were scared of him and so were a few adults, but he was a harmless old man really. Whenever he decided to make rain he used to go out on his own, paint up in ochre and do whatever he did to set the rain cycle in motion. When often it did not rain, we would ask what happened. He would say that he had called up the rain, alright, but the person from a neighbouring tribe had called up the wind and had blown it all his way and it was his fault. At Finnis Springs one of the persons responsible for the wind was old Jack Conway whose Arabana name was Indanantya which meant 'wind'. Another man of importance in the community at Finnis Springs was old Tom Marsh. His wife, Jessie, was called Wadlhu-tharnili, 'eater of sand'. Old Tom's ability was that he could astral travel and he had this knack of knowing things in advance of everyone else. He claimed that he could travel underground at night and would arrive at and see things at distant destinations and then he would tell you the next day. For example, he would tell you of someone breaking his leg and even name the person, then some days later you would hear that that person a long way away had indeed suffered a broken leg. You could ask him where certain people were and he would tell you even though no one at Finnis Springs knew of their whereabouts or had any messages from them. Another man who had this ability to astral travel and who came to Finnis Springs often visiting was an old Antikirinya man called Aeroplane George. He was very well known for his ability and was a true Arkaya, 'magic man'.



One of the Arabana beliefs was that you could also sing incantations to make people do things. Witchdoctors in particular, but ordinary men too, claimed to have powers to 'sing' women so that the women would fall madly in love with them. Women also claimed to have this power over men. What you would do is 'sing' a small object and then you placed the object where the person of your interest could readily see it. Like, for instance, a brooch or a pretty feather and you would then place it somewhere on your person. You could even 'sing' a brightly coloured shirt or a pretty dress. The subject of your desire upon seeing the 'sung' object would reputedly fall madly in love with you. Another way women would do this was to sing themselves (their own bodies) and then at night at the general corroboree they would dance a 'women's' dance and the object of their desire would fall madly in love with them upon seeing them dance.

Arabana Ways and Customs



In our last yarn we talked of Minparus, rituals and beliefs. To coin a phrase, beliefs are what make the world go around and I guess that was certainly true of the Arabana. We believed that the physical world that we saw around us every day was created in centuries past by long dead ancestors who had supernatural powers for whatever reasons and purposes of the time. Now we use these creations and energies for our personal benefit and shape our lives around them. We, Arabana, call and know these beliefs, legends and stories as Ularaka, and we believe that they were passed down to us by our ancient ancestors themselves. The Ularaka and stories cover every creek, every hill and every natural feature of Arabana Country. I guess that it is a history that has been handed down from time immemorial of how, why and when things came to be in existence in our natural world as it is today. It was an ancient past era in which the ancestors lived and travelled about on the face of the land. They created the features and landforms and established through their conduct, for their descendants, the precedents for correct living and responsibilities to one another and to the land that nourished them. Therefore, the singing and dancing of the sacred Ularaka songs was believed to confer on the Arabana singers themselves many of the powers once possessed by the totemic ancestors whose changed and immortal bodies can still be seen today at many of the ceremonial sites. Arabana believed that the Ularaka songs were composed not by men but by the totemic ancestors themselves. The concept termed by Europeans as the ‘Dreamtime’ therefore is central to Aboriginal beliefs Australia-wide. I think someone once said, ‘The paradox in all this is that the ‘Dreamtime’ is immortal, indwelling, is ever present and beyond or outside time as Europeans know it’. Consequently, the forces of the ‘Dreamtime’ can be tapped here and now and adjusted and used for the regular rejuvenation of nature and man via proper use of rituals and ceremonies. That is why Aborigines held many corroborees in the old days. Unfortunately, they don’t hold that many corroborees anymore and are slowly forgetting and losing the old stories and Ularaka, together with the songs and dances connected to them.

Beliefs also shaped custom and the way we lived and ordered our lives. Arabana had many customs and regulations and I guess many people today would think that some of them were strange. Custom dictated how

one interacted socially. For instance, who you could and could not talk to, who you could keep company with and things like that. For example, when a young boy goes through his initiation rituals and then comes back into the mainstream of Aboriginal society, he is not allowed to make contact or speak directly to his mother. She can speak directly to him, but he must not look at her and when speaking must turn away and speak to a third person who then relays his conversation to his mother. That is why young men generally avoided contact and social interaction with their mothers after their initiation rituals. You were also forbidden to speak to or make physical contact with your mother-in-law or your prospective mother-in-law. Another taboo was that although you had full social interactions with your uncles you were not allowed to make actual physical contact, especially with uncles from your father's side. I suppose the observance of customs and regulations somehow made for the smooth running of the community.

A custom that I always found curious was the custom of *yuwa yanhirnda*, which loosely translated, meant 'laying down the law'. Some person would at times get up early in the predawn twilight before sunrise (this person was nearly always female). Then in their loudest voice would denounce all the wrongs that they perceived were being perpetrated in the community. The speaker's voice could be heard quite clearly and distinctively on the still morning air. They would denounce this and that and even persons that they had personal grievances with and the wrongs that they were doing in the community. Now, believe it or not, everybody took this as the speaker's right to speak out like this about matters that concerned them because this was the forum and the time in which to do so. Most people more or less dismissed it and did not pay too much heed to what was said. By etiquette, no one was allowed to gainsay the speaker while the speaker was talking or to answer any criticism at that time. But human nature being what it is, there were many times when great exception was taken to what was being said. At this point however, etiquette, or custom if you like, and a law made by wise lawmen in the long distant past stepped in. That law said that you could not do anything about or answer what was being said until the sun had passed the half way position in the sky, sometime after noon. So effectively, the chances were that people who were angry at what was being said in the early morning had cooled down somewhat by noon. Nevertheless, there were many big fights resulting from this and I, as a child, have seen some fierce and intense spear and boomerang fights in the late afternoons between the men as a result. Incidentally, I had an aunt, a big lady, who would at times go out to the flat and mix it with the men in these fights. She could not throw a spear so well, but, *boy*, could she throw a boomerang!

She used to dodge and parry the flying spears with ease and used her kanti (fighting stick) with telling effect. Thinking back, I really can't recall anyone getting seriously injured in these fights, although, there were usually a lot of sore bodies afterwards.

There was another custom, involved in when you travelled to a place that you had never been to before; like, for instance, you travelled to a strange place outside of your own territory. On arriving there, the first thing that you would do is go to the nearest waterhole or source of water and splash a handful of water onto your face. That is to signify to the spirits of the place that you are a stranger but come with good intentions and for them to take care of you during your stay in the area. Arabana used to do this regularly. Arabana people also used to take water with them on the occasion that they visited graves of deceased relatives. They then would sprinkle water onto the grave in the belief that the deceased relative was thirsty and needed a drink, believing that, after all, they could not very well get up and get it themselves. On these visits they would also put tree branches on the graves to provide shelter from the sun. On the whole though, Arabana people mostly stayed away from grave sites in the belief that the dead people's spirits were a lonely lot and therefore, they would steal the spirits of persons who were alive just to have someone to keep them company. Arabana believed that spirits were the most active just at or after sundown. Arabana also had the custom of burying their dead west of their current camp, toward the setting sun.



The whirlwind is also believed by Arabana to be dead people travelling by day and they go to great lengths to avoid being caught in their path. In the event that a whirlwind got too close, they used to shout and throw handfuls of dirt at it to turn it aside. To have one engulf you is a sign that terrible bad luck, and misfortune will come to you very soon after. After saying all that though, Arabana had an ancient ancestor of Ularaka fame whose favourite mode of travel was by whirlwind. He used to travel in the middle of the whirlwind and all you could see was his eyebrows. His name was Winti Pilpa, he lived in and around Lake Eyre and he was a very fierce old man.



The bearded dragon of Central Australia was an animal that also featured in Arabana customs. Kadni, the Arabana called it. It was a favourite

food of which the skin was also eaten. There was only one way that the Arabana killed a bearded dragon and that was to pick it up, bend its head down and then bite it in the exposed neck, thus breaking its spinal cord. The bearded dragon was also considered a messenger. If one of these lizards entered your camp environment, it was considered as an omen and meant that something had happened or will happen to you or your distant family. It was not necessarily all bad news and it could be anything. Personally, I have known this to happen a few times. I think I'd best mention here, too, that Minparus (witch doctors) used the Kadni as a 'familiar', you know, something like how the old-time witches used to use cats as familiars. The Minparus used to use the Kadni in healing ceremonies and in rituals to ward off evil spirits. So, as you can see, the bearded dragon was a revered animal in Arabana society and customs.

Kurdaityi, the Aboriginal Police



Now there is a word that is guaranteed to strike terror into the hearts of many an Aborigine! It seems that everybody and everyone has their own distorted and misinformed version of what a Kurdaityi was and is. I guess that it is understandable seeing that people in general are fond of talking of and inventing scary beings and creatures and conjuring up bogie men, especially to scare children and the impressionable.

Oh, the Kurdaityi was real enough. To the Arabana, he was known as Kutyu and the name itself conjures up visions of a shadowy and furtive figure which is seen for a second and vanishes in the next instant!

I was born at a time when Arabana traditions and customs were still strong, so I was thoroughly immersed in Aboriginal culture and way of life and was very familiar with the concept of the Kurdaityi. Of course, the Kurdaityi was always male. Growing up as children, we were indoctrinated and schooled by our Elders and nearest of kin about the Kurdaityi and other beings and creatures, both real and imaginary. We were always being warned not to leave the environs of the camp and to never walk alone, but in groups, especially at night. Let me tell you the little that I know of the Kurdaityi, if you like, from the days of my childhood.

In pre-European days, Aboriginal people lived in a society that was presided over by its own laws, regulations, codes of conduct, and procedures of protocol, all of which were administered by the most senior male members of the tribe. It was a man's world way back then and it was the men who had the responsibility to maintain and administer law and order appropriately. There were penalties for breaches of these laws and protocols and people who interacted improperly with each other did so at their own peril. Most ordinary matters were attended to by local senior men in accordance with the law. Of course, there were women's councils that dealt with certain aspects of 'women's business' but that was a different part of the law as a whole that kept balance and harmony in the community. There were instances, of course, where men took up weapons to settle personal differences that resulted in fierce and bloody fights which sometimes ended in a death, but these instances were considered to be within the confines of the law. However, there was a high council that consisted of a group of the most senior men of

the tribe and these men dealt with the most serious breaches of Aboriginal Law and their decisions were always absolute and final. Serious breaches included such incidents as speaking in detail about initiation ceremonies, accidentally witnessing initiation ceremonies, touching objects that non-initiates were not allowed to handle and being where non-initiates were not allowed to be. Also killing somebody illegally and the rape of young girls under puberty and other breaches of tribal law that were considered extreme. The penalty for all these crimes was nearly always death.

When the higher council of elders pronounced the sentence of death, they also nominated a certain number of men to go around to the man's camp and carry out the edict there and then or alternatively, take the condemned man out into the bush for execution. On many occasions, when a man suspects that he is about to be condemned and is in deep and serious trouble, he immediately absconds and tries to secretly travel as fast and as far away as he can. It is at this point where the Kurdaityi gets involved. They are the tribal police and are nominated by the elders to pursue the condemned man in silence and utter secrecy and to carry out that verdict of death.

I do not know what the procedure is because it has always been top secret and any talk about it back then could bring a death sentence. I only know what has been talked about in whispers and what has been gathered from quiet confidential conversations. A number of men are chosen from which three to four are picked out to form the actual execution squad, the reason being not to draw attention to the group once they are on the move. All this can happen weeks after the offending party has absconded. The elders ensure that the chosen group are taught special songs and chants and given endless instructions on what they must and must not do. When they are about to leave, they paint their bodies with red ochre and white paint made from the rain stone which has been burnt in the fire and ground to a powder. Interesting thing here is that another addition is made to the red ochre and white paint; this is a mixture made from green stink beetles that are found mainly on the bullock bush, well it's a tree really, and Arabana call the beetle Tharlura, but I do not know what the English name for it is. The beetles are found on some gum trees too and when they are crushed up, they really stink! The whole mixture is 'sung' with special songs and chants and these spells are supposed to make people who are painted up with this mixture invisible to the eyes of ordinary people. At some point in the long preparation period, the little toe of the left foot is disjointed and ends up resting on the neighbouring toe. Why this was so, I could never understand as I would have thought that it would take some time to heal and that would have hinder the travelling process but that was part of the ritual and I have

actually seen several old men in my boyhood days with said toe disjointed. Sometimes, the membrane in the nose is also pierced and a small animal bone inserted. The hair on the head is smeared with red ochre and animal fat and tied back with string made from animal fur, or sometimes from the fibre of some trees, all of which makes the Kurdaityi look fierce and evil.

When they begin on the trail of the condemned offender, they go on a night when there is no moon because it is said that the Kurdaityi may not see or look at their own shadows as this will bring them bad luck and even death. To begin with, they do not walk but trot in single file and sing a chant as they travel because they believe that this shortens their journey and brings their destination physically closer to them. They travel only at night and stay concealed and hidden at some carefully selected location during the day. During the journey, they hunt for small game for food but this is done in such a way as not to leave any tell-tale tracks or indications of their passing.

They make themselves well aware of the living areas of people in the Country that they are travelling in and make certain that they do not make accidental contact and ensure also that people don't even know that they have been. That is not to say that they do not take advantage of any camps that they may come across in foraging for food. Talking of modern times here, but I think that I myself, may have been a victim in encounters of this kind. At various times in my youth I used to work on sheep stations in central and western South Australia. On occasions, I used to work alone as a boundary rider on these stations. A boundary rider would best be described as one who works on the outer fringes of the pastoral property, ensuring that the stock do not wander far from watering points and feeding areas. It was all horses way back then, of course, and I used to ride around the outside of the tracks and turn back any stock that may have strayed. This applied particularly to newly acquired stock, be it sheep or cattle.

My camp consisted of a swag on the ground and a windbreak made from the branches from nearby trees. My cooking arrangements were an open fire where I used to boil my billy for tea and cook damper in a camp oven and boil corned meat in a meat bucket of an evening after work; I used to put them on the branches of the windbreak to cool overnight. I have awoken early for breakfast in the mornings sometimes to find some of my meat missing from the windbreak and the damper neatly broken in half. This used to puzzle me; I mean, a fox would take some meat, maybe, but break a damper in half? I asked an old Aboriginal man about it once, back at the station, and he said that travelling Kurdaityi would do something like that, but he told me not to worry as they would not necessarily harm me. According to him, in order to come into the camp, they 'sang' you and

this spell made you sleep soundly so that you would not awaken while they were in camp. He also said that while they did not wear it when they were travelling, they put on Kurdaityi shoes made from emu feathers to come into camp so that they did not leave any tell-tale footprints around your campsite.

On arrival at permanent camps and wanting to make inquiries of their quarry, the Kurdaityi may do it in various ways. It is said that they sneak into camp on moonless nights wearing their Kurdaityi shoes and await the opportunity to accost a solitary person who may be walking alone and make inquiries of that person. When they are through making their inquiries, they put a spell on that person by 'singing' that person and the subject supposedly promptly forgets they ever saw a Kurdaityi. Often, when the spell does not work, they kill that person because the fact of their presence must be kept secret at all costs. Alternatively, a couple of the squad will wash off the ochre from their body and hair, walk into camp and pretend to be just a pair of travellers and thus casually find out if their quarry had passed through this way. This method, however, has its drawbacks because of the little toe on the left foot identifying them as Kurdaityi. They must ensure that this is not seen. Back in the old days, the Kurdaityi did not wear shoes! If their victim is not in this camp, the pair quietly re-joins their group in the bush and continue their journey.

There was an interesting bit of talk going around in my childhood, for it was said that you could actually kill a Kurdaityi legitimately and there was no comeback or payback. The story went that if you were to surprise a Kurdaityi and catch him unawares, then his life was forfeit and you could dispatch him there and then without him offering any resistance in his defence. The flaw in this, however, is to remember that the Kurdaityi is a member of a squad and his fellow team members are usually nearby. You can bet that they would not want any harm to come to any member of their party and jeopardise their mission, so they will kill you to protect him. The advice from the old people was always that if you happen to see a Kurdaityi or have an inkling that any might be in the vicinity, give that place a wide berth, pretend you never saw one and head for home. You should never look directly at a Kurdaityi or where you thought you may have seen him. Look away but keep that place in the corner of your eye and head away in the opposite direction, remembering not to hurry or panic.

Tommy Thompson, who was an uncle of mine, once had an experience along these lines. He was a traditional man and very bush savvy and at this time of the story he was away out bush, working alone, sinking a well for water. He became aware that a group of Kurdaityi were passing through and maybe using the well that he was camped at for a day or two

of rest so he thought of a plan to see if he could isolate one and see what happened. I will not explain what the idea he actually devised was because it was a bit complicated and you probably would not understand it anyhow. Nevertheless, it worked! Old Uncle Tom had this Kurdaityi dead to rights and separated from his group, but Uncle Tom was a soft-hearted man and could not go through with the rest of it. Instead, he made friends with the Kurdaityi because, as he said many times afterwards while re-telling the story, the Kurdaityi was a human being after all and was just doing his job and probably a family man back in his community to boot. Funny thing though, we kids got to know that man very well as he used to come and visit Uncle Tom many times at Finness Springs years after that incident. Tjamu, we used to call him which meant grandfather in his language. As far as I know, at that time anyway, he was the only man not of our tribe that we kids accorded that honour and deep respect.

Having found and caught up with their quarry, the Kurdaityi's work now really begins. As one can expect, the man who is sought is nervous and alert. He always stays in a crowd and tries not to be isolated. And yet the Kurdaityi have to get him alone. They cannot just go in and kill him as their own lives would be in forfeit from the men of the camp where he has sought refuge, nor can they give an inkling or let anyone be aware of their presence in the locality. But the Kurdaityi is full of tricks, guile and ingenuity and patience. As stated previously, sometimes they wash the red ochre and paint off their bodies and walk into camp, passing themselves off as merely passing travellers. Mostly, the Kurdaityi watch and wait, quietly keeping the camp under surveillance and monitoring the movements and habits of their intended victim so that when an opportunity presents itself to waylay and apprehend him, they seize him quickly and silently and take him a long way out of camp.

Now the execution of the mission that the council of elders prescribed is brought into fruition, and that is to carry out the death sentence. This is where things get a bit confusing and obscure from my perspective. They do not kill the victim outright but perform a manoeuvre which Aboriginal people call 'choking', and although hands are placed around the neck, it is not actually physically choking or strangling. This is steeped deep in secrecy and mystery and is never ever talked about. It was an art form that was taught to only a few carefully chosen men in total secrecy under the penalty of instant death should any details ever be made public. Fortunately or unfortunately, according to one's own perspective, this is an art form that now has been lost forever except for maybe a few very old men who may still recall some aspects of it. Back in the old days, this was the method and

instrument of death favoured by the old men sitting in council on serious breaches of tribal law. As stated previously, this mode of execution is all but extinct in today's modern-day practice of Aboriginal law by Aboriginal people and the art and knowledge to perform and execute it is gone and lost forever and is buried with the old people. I was told confidentially, some time back, that in these modern-day times when a death sentence is prescribed by some ceremony or a decree by some old men sitting in council on serious breaches of Aboriginal law that a .22 rifle is used with a shot to the forehead and the offending victim quietly disappears which I guess, taking the fact of European law into consideration, would create problems in today's society. This would not have been the case about forty or fifty years ago when Aboriginal people's names tended not to be registered on regular rolls or registrars. Aboriginal people were not really known individually outside of their particular community or social group, so back then it would have been easy for someone to disappear and not be heard from again. Of course, most people in the Aboriginal community would have known of or suspected the nature of the demise of that person but such a strict wall of silence, on the pain of instant death, prevailed in the whole community that it could outweigh and outrival the code of silence as prescribed and practised by the Mafia in modern day white society.

Anyway, back to the Kurdaityi. Whatever acts or ritual were performed, the subject was transformed into a virtual zombie, and all this without a mark or a bruise on the body. A true live walking dead. I do not know how long the ritual takes but it is said that at the end, they make the man walk back alone to the camp and at various places along the way, they jump out suddenly to surprise him and if they get a reaction, it is an indication that whatever they had done did not work, so they take him back again and perform the procedure once more. I am told, however, that this rarely happens, and the man walks back to camp not hearing, seeing, or taking notice of anything around him and goes to sleep. He can be awoken but takes no interest in what's going on and, in fact, is listless and lifeless. He does not speak or respond to anything said to him, nor does he eat or drink or show interest in food even though people try to feed him or help him. When he does get up, for instance to go to the toilet, he walks with a stiff-legged gait and his eyes are lifeless and glassy. He usually lasts in this condition for two or three days at most before he dies. I was born and grew up in Aboriginal society and know a lot about Aboriginal lore and culture and can honestly and truthfully say to you that in my childhood, I have seen men in this condition. To a child, even living in that world, it was scary! It makes you think and wonder and get you jumping at shadows. But, aargh...

that was away back then; things are different now...



I have, myself, seen a Kurdaityi but only the once. It was back when I was working on one of the sheep stations in north-western South Australia many years ago. We were mustering a large paddock this day and this paddock was pretty scrubby with mulga, acacia, and other small shrubs. Sand hill country, of course. I was doing the outside mustering, you know, picking up sheep that were on or near the outside fence and turning them into where another couple of men were riding straight down the middle of the paddock and gathering all the sheep and taking them to a predestined rendezvous on the far side of the paddock. Another rider, of course, was doing the same on the other side of the paddock. Anyway, I was on this high sand hill and having dismounted from my horse, I was walking and leading him along by the bridle reins when I decided to answer the call of nature. There was a thicket of wattle and low shrubs on a high part of the sand hill just ahead of me and I thought that that would be an ideal spot, so I started walking towards it. Suddenly, my horse gave a loud snort, reared up on his hind legs and lashed out with his front hooves narrowly missing my head and then jerked free and bolted down the sand hill to the flat ground beyond. Startled, I looked up to clearly see, for a fleeting instant, a near naked Aboriginal man in designs painted in red ochre, white paint, and feathers, with his hair tied back in traditional Kurdaityi style, and standing fully armed with spears and boomerangs. He vanished as quickly as he had materialised and for a moment I was frozen in panic, but my old people's teachings and advice quickly came to my aid and I immediately turned around looking for my horse.

Fortunately for me, the horse that I rode that day was one that I had personally broken in and trained, and the one thing that I always taught my horses to do was to stand still and to face the trainer when the bridle reins were touching the ground. In my mind I knew and realised that the Kurdaityi had shown himself to warn me to be on my way and I was also mindful that a Kurdaityi was never alone. I forced myself to walk normally towards my horse who was standing shaking and trembling out on the flat beyond the foot of the sand hill and facing me as he was taught to do. I walked as calmly as I could to my horse. Well, okay... I think that I ran the last twenty or thirty yards in record time and leapt into the saddle and me and my horse got the hell out of there! Licketty split!

So, there it is. That is what my understanding of what the Kurdaityi

is. I do not know if the Kurdaityi still exists in today's changing world. He very well may but it would be in a very different format. Modern day Aboriginal people tend to say today that they see Kurdaityi, all painted up, hanging around the fringes of townships and Aboriginal camps and I wonder to myself, 'Do they really know what they are talking about?' In my opinion, these sightings could not be of Kurdaityi because you would not be able to see a Kurdaityi if he did not want to be seen as he was skilled and adept at making himself invisible by blending into any surrounding that he found himself in. Remember, to the Kurdaityi, to be seen is to be killed. No, the sightings around towns and camps today are of men who paint themselves up to scare women and children or who are on a personal vendetta or secret agenda with the intent of intimidation, rape, and plain murder... and I reckon that the Kurdaityi of old would have known how to deal with them!



Let me tell you a funny little story to finish off our yarn. I was working for some time as a bus driver for the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, which is an Aboriginal organisation dealing with Aboriginal health. I was working this night on nightshift and I was taking patients home from the doctors and dropping them off at various locations in town and at fringe camps on the outskirts of town. The last patient on the bus that night was an old man by the name of Bertie, and he lived in a temporary camp about four kilometres east of town. The entrance to that camp was rough and bumpy and was full of deep ruts and even deeper holes! So, I stopped about a hundred metres short of the camp and said, "Okay, Bertie, I'll see you tomorrow." The night was moonless and very dark, but I had my headlights on high beam and shining towards and right into camp. My words, however, put old Bertie in a panic.

"No... no. Take me all the way in," he cried.

"Why?" I asked.

"It's only just there and I am feeling a little tired... Kurdaityi might get me," he replied.

"What Kurdaityi?" I scoffed, "there is no Kurdaityi around here and where are they coming from, anyhow?"

"Oh, yes there are," he assured me. "They're coming from Yuendumu."

"Yuendumu is about three to four hundred kilometre west from here," I laughed, "Surely they can't walk that far."

“They don’t walk anymore, Bruz,” he countered, “Nowadays they ride around in Toyotas!”

I could not come up with an answer to that one so I bumped my way into camp, laughing my head off all the way!



A little bit more as to the method of the final act used by the Kurdaityi in carrying out the death sentence. I was born at a time when tradition in Aboriginal society was strong and very much alive. I have seen many strange things performed by the witch doctors (Minparū) and some old men in general. Strange things that you would never believe. Aboriginal people were great believers in magic and I was no exception, and yet, despite my personal experiences and the evidence before my eyes, I have always been a sceptic and have always wondered how these things can be. My closest relatives and friends always thought that I was mad and feared that it would be my undoing someday. As an example of my scepticism, take the incident of death by choking (so called), ‘Ungku Pardarndaa’ Arabana people would say, and the resulting transformation of that person into a zombie. I wonder... were the old people adepts in hypnosis? Auto suggestion? Or was there some form of drug used? Oh, the old people would skin me and hang me out to dry if ever they were to know my thoughts! Just as matter of interest, women were also executed in this manner for serious breaches of Aboriginal law.



Syd 'Ringer' shoeing a horse on Clifton Hills Station.



Dinner time.



Working on the railway, me standing up.



Syd swinging hammer.



First engine on Broad Gauge going to Alice Springs.



Syd. First engine and train on road going to Alice Springs.



L: Syd with his Land Rover at Marree. Arthur Murray (left), Percy Dodd (Right).

R: Mervyn Dodd's dad and Syd's brother-in-law at Finnis.



L: Cousins: Steve Hele (left) and Syd (right)

R: Syd playing the guitar.



Syd with brothers Bert and Leonard.



Syd (LH) and Mervyn Dodd (RH) at Alice Springs with his grey & white Holden that got washed down the River Todd at Alice Springs.



Syd at Marree (he is waving) with a group of Children.



Drovers from Finnis Springs up in Queensland. Syd's uncle Fred is on the horse. From left to right: Max Thomas, Stan Warren (boss drover), Brian Mark, Fred Strangways, Sam Braden, Syd Buzzacott, Norman Woods.

Photo taken by Percy Dodd.



Church congregation at Finnis.



My father Henry and my brother Leonard and Jack Carrot. Dinner camp way out West near Kati Thanda.



Syd and Alfie Merrick at Parakilya. They were dogging at Emerald (scalps of a dingo were a pound a head).



Train wreck near Curdimurka.



Syd, Sheila (my sister), Baby Martha, Percy Dodd (my brother in law) and my father with freshly baked bread.



Syd speaking to train control, Pt Augusta.



Syd at Curdimurka.



Syd with children at Charley Angus Bore near the shore of Kati Thanda.



Yasmin and Colleen on NSU engine at Marree.



Syd and Yasmin with the Larkin kids explaining the graves at Finnis Springs.



Syd at Curdimurka Cottage. On my left hand is window of my room at my first job.



Yasmin at Davenport Springs out on Finnis Country.



Syd and Yasmin at site of old woolshed.



Left to Right: Olga, Alfred Murray (small boy), my mother Edie, Tommy Thompson, my father Henry, Alan Buzzacott and Lorrie Reece (missionary).



Mum – an ill old lady.

Finness Springs and the Supernatural



The last time that we sat down for one of our little talks, I think we spoke of the strange happenings at Finness Springs. It was (and still is) a magical old place. I guess that we should talk some more of old Finness, as we used to call it, sometime soon and what we used to do as youngsters growing up there. Not that old Finness was uniquely magical in itself but earth spirits or nature spirits, if you like, seemed to follow Arabana people around wherever they went and created that profoundly Aboriginal aura about them. Of course, the old men of the tribe brought their own brand of mystique and magic that added to the volatile and mysterious atmosphere that seemed to surround the permanent and semi-permanent camps of the Arabana people. These old men included the witchdoctors, the rainmakers, and those who were said to be able to control the wind and other elements together with those who were said to have clairvoyant powers and not forgetting yet others who claimed to have the ability to travel in time. Old Finness had all of these and more, plus its fair share of passing Kurdaityi.



The Arabana believed absolutely in the power of ‘spirits’ and all things spiritual; this belief affected and was part of their everyday life. Take this example for instance, a friend of mine was travelling one time at night on horseback and driving other horses carrying his packs in front of him. He was heading towards Finness Springs and coming via Bopeechee which is north of Finness. He was on the high tableland country about ten or twelve kilometres north of the homestead when he happened to glance down to the west to a place we called Box Swamp, a favourite hunting ground for the people of Finness. It was a cold night and he had travelled a long way and had in fact come from Gudnampanha. What he saw in the near distance at Box Swamp was a nice cheery fire and as the idea of a nice hot cup of tea and a chat with whoever was there appealed to him, he was in two minds as whether to go down there or not but in the end decided not to. He glanced away and continued on towards Finness but looked back a few minutes later and saw that the fire had disappeared. What in the next instance sent cold

shivers up and down his spine, though, was the clear sound of the amused laughter coming from the direction where the fire had been of a well-known local identity. The trouble was, though, that man had recently passed away! Needless to say, Rex left that area in a hurry and got to Finness as soon as he could. He always swore that this incident did indeed take place.

There were many such instances of personal experiences like this that many people used to tell but I myself have not had any of that kind at old Finness. Nowadays, I often go back on my own and camp at many different locations on the old property and relive the old memories. Many of my Arabana and other Aboriginal friends and relations often say to me, "Are you not scared that the ghosts of the old people might visit you one night as you sit alone drinking a cup of tea beside your campfire? What would you do then?" I often smile at this and reply that at least then we could have a good conversation in Arabana! Not that that concept is entirely out of the question. An old 'greenie' that I spoke to a couple of years ago who was living alone and camping in the old homestead at Finness Springs for a time, told me a story of how he was washing up late one night when he heard, quite clearly, the laughter of a young child just outside the window. Being eager for company and some conversation, he hurriedly finished washing up his dishes and went outside to welcome what he thought were visitors but, although he had a good look around, he could not find or see anyone. About fifty or sixty yards north of the old homestead building once stood a large open-top water tank that used to be filled with water by a windmill from a well. This water was used to water stock animals from a trough just below the tank. Although we were not allowed to, and often got into trouble for doing so, as children we used to swim in that tank. Unfortunately, a small boy drowned in that tank one day as he swam alone. I wonder if the laughter that the old 'greenie' heard was that of that boy, or was it that of some of the many other young children who had passed away at Finness Springs?

There was an instance about three or four years ago where there was a conference in Marree which many Arabana people from far and scattered places attended. There was a wish by some of the people there for a visit to old Finness Springs which is about forty-five miles north of Marree. I volunteered to take them so we started off with me leading the way in my Toyota and a bus load of adults and children following. We pulled up about two to three hundred yards short of entering Finness and waited for the bus to catch up. One of the children then asked me if there were anybody living at the old Mission to which I replied that there was no one and in fact the place had been deserted for some time. The young girl then asked me, "Who, then, is that man with the blue shirt sitting on the log?" She pointed to the place

where my Uncle Fred's home once stood. I could see the log but could not see anyone sitting on it. Seconds later, the bus pulled up behind us and I was asked the same question by some of the children in the bus. None of us adults could see anything, and I made light of it all by saying that the old Mission was indeed deserted. Everybody soon forgot the incident in the excitement of exploring, looking around and being shown the history of the old place. People often say, both Aboriginal and European, that young children are more perceptible to psychic phenomena than adults are. So, I wonder, did the children indeed see a man sitting on that log? All the children insisted that the man wore a blue shirt. My uncle Fred mostly wore a blue shirt but so did another uncle, old Tommy Thompson. Both men had happy natures and would have welcomed anyone to Finniss Springs, especially relatives. Both men loved children. We will come back to Uncle Fred in a moment.



There is another place in Finniss Springs that had a strange and odd reputation. It is a stony plain, west of the old Thipa Creek Bore on the road that goes from Finniss to the railway siding at Alberrie Creek. Arabana did not exactly avoid it nor were afraid of it and, in fact, on hunting trips, camped regularly in the vicinity, but I doubt if a single Arabana would have camped alone there. It was said that on some nights the voices of people going about their everyday business could be heard there. The voices were distinctive but always in the distance and you could not quite make out as to what was being said, but what made it all eerie was that within the general flow of conversation you could sometimes hear the faint sound of distant laughter as if some of the people were sharing a private joke.



Coming back to my Uncle Fred, he was a gentle giant, had a happy jovial nature and possessed great physical strength as well as having great strength of character. His Aboriginal name was Murrili which meant 'shield'. His one weakness was that he loved playing practical jokes. Sometimes, though, his practical jokes backfired on him. At one time he had gone a distance of ten or twelve miles to the railway siding at Alberrie Creek with Jack Carrot. We kids used to call old Jack Carrot 'Brother Jack'. They had gone to the siding with a horse and cart and some pack horses to collect and bring back supplies for the station from a goods train that used to travel up from Port Augusta to Alice Springs once weekly. In this instance, the train was late and was not due in until about midnight. Uncle Fred was bored so he went down to an old red and rusty railway bridge nearby and stripped

down and smeared the red rust from the bridge all over himself. He then returned to the campfire where old Jack was sitting, pretending to be in great distress and agitation, crying out "Jack! Jack! Please help me. I have been attacked by a mob of Kurdaityi!" Well... Jack took one look at what appeared to be blood all over him and he took fright! He jumped up in panic and grabbed a horse that was grazing nearby and galloped all the way back to Finnis Springs as fast as he could, leaving Uncle Fred alone at the siding. The upshot of it all was that when the train pulled into the siding at midnight, Uncle Fred had to load the supplies and goods onto the cart and packhorses by himself and take the cart and horses back to the station alone. The old fellow used to have a great laugh whenever he told this story of how the joke backfired on him.



I had a run in with a Kurdaityi once. In my younger days, I used to go droving cattle up and down the Birdsville Track with another of my uncles, Arthur Murray. One time there, we had a five- or six-week break between droving contracts. So, having delivered our latest consignment of fat cattle to the stockyards in Marree and seen them safely trucked away by train to the markets in Adelaide, Uncle Arthur decided to take his plant of horses back home to Finnis for a well-earned rest, a trip of about two days. He entrusted me with this task together with my cousin Ray, his son, who was younger than I was. Uncle Arthur stayed in Marree and was coming home by train in a few days' time. Everything went well and Ray and I were about a half day travel away from Finnis Springs when this event occurred. There was a small railway bridge over a little creek quite near the road, about two kilometres south of Pole Creek, near where the dog-proof (dingo) fence runs through. Ray and I were just chatting as we rode along behind the plant of horses. Ray was riding a young, skittish and nervous horse that we had recently broken in for riding; one of three brumbies that we had caught near Clayton on our way down on our last droving trip. Another one we had broken in to carry one of our set of packs.

Suddenly and without any warning, this giant figure burst out of shrubbery near the bridge with a blood curdling yell, brandishing spears and boomerangs on high! He was semi naked and was painted up with red and white ochre. He had patterns made with the down of swan down his chest and belly and had a headdress of eagle feathers on his head, together with emu feathers on his ankles and wrists. His nose was tied back with string and his forehead and face was painted in a gruesome manner. He looked a fearsome sight as he did a war dance there right in front of us. Ray's horse

reared up violently in fright, nearly unseating him, then bolted right through the middle of our plant of horses, scattering them in all directions with Ray hanging on for dear life. Then the other young horse that we had broken in as a pack horse decided to get rid of its packs and started bucking and kicking, strewing the pack bags all over the countryside. I was in a quandary as whether to go to Ray's aid or to retrieve our gear and the pack bags or round up the horses in a move to quieten them down or what? But me being frightened by that little old Kurdaityi? No! Of course not. Well... maybe just a little. When I looked around to find him, though, I found him beside the road, doubled up with laughter. Yeah, yeah... It was Uncle Fred. We were on the end of one of his little practical jokes again. He, his family and another family were camped at Pole Creek just on the Finniss Springs side of the dog-proof fence (rabbit-proof fence). We camped with them that night and enjoyed their hospitality before going on to Finniss Springs the next day. We enjoyed a great meal of kangaroo and emu which they had cooked during the day and something both Ray and I missed on our droving trips.



Our notions about and beliefs in the spiritual and the supernatural stayed with us wherever we went. I remember one time, again on a droving trip in Queensland, where we had delivered a mob of cattle at Quilpie in central Queensland and had come back onto the Cooper's Creek on our way to pick up yet another mob, this time to bring back into South Australia. We came to this station on the Cooper, Durham Downs, one of many owned by the Kidman company. We made camp about a kilometre north of the homestead on the banks of the Cooper Creek. Every member of our five-man droving team was Aboriginal. The boss drover's name was Bill Breadon but everybody called him 'Todmorden Willy' because he had been born at and spent most of his early years growing up on Todmorden station, north of Oodnadatta in South Australia. The rest of us were young blokes from South Australia, too, except one who was a Queenslander from Rockhampton way. The name of our Queensland friend was 'Milk' Johnston; he had been a boxer and that is the only name that we knew him by. Old Bill knew the manager and had been invited up to the 'big house' for supper and to spend the night, leaving the rest of us at the camp. It was a cold night and although the river was lined with trees, finding enough wood for the campfire was a bit difficult as there didn't seem to be too much about. At any rate, we all pitched in, going in different directions and coming back with armfuls of wood and even carrying logs back to the campsite on our shoulders. On one of these trips away from camp we came across a number of logs all piled

up together and decided that this was an old grave site. From around where we come, a large pile of stones is placed on top of the grave. This acts as a marker and also helps to keep wild animals such as dogs and dingoes from disturbing the grave. Up in the channel country of Queensland and on parts of the Cooper Creek, however, where there are hardly any large stones, the local Aboriginal people used to use logs of wood instead for the same purpose. So, there was no way in the world that any of us Arabana boys were going to touch any of those logs. In fact, we would have moved except for the fact that we had already established camp and it was already getting dark. Anyway, back at camp we congratulated ourselves for collecting such a big pile of wood for the night and then the Queenslander, who had not been with us when we discovered the old grave site, dropped a bombshell. "You know," he said, "I was lucky. I found a large heap of logs someone had piled up and left and I brought some of them back here". Well, that stopped all of us in our tracks because we had a good idea where those logs had come from, but as it was already dark by then, none of us was going to take any of those logs back. We settled down behind our windbreak and after supper sat around the campfire yarning and telling stories. The river was about fifty yards away and the banks were pretty steep but there was a path leading down to the water's edge. The banks of the river were lined with trees, small shrubs and tall grass, through which the path meandered. We were all in a good mood, the fire was warm and cheery and we kept putting more wood on the fire when it burned down as we talked and yarned the night away. We talked of many things such as the different experiences that we each had had and the strange sights that we had seen and of ghosts, spooks, and the supernatural. At about this time, the Queenslander got up and put one of his logs on the fire. The rest of us were not so sure that this was a good idea, but we talked on; we heard the noise soon after and it sounded as if something was being dragged on the hard ground. Everybody stopped talking and looked around. The noise seemed to be coming from the direction of the path that went through the tall grass and shrubs into the river. We all listened intently but there was no more sound so we resumed chatting and started getting ready for bed. When we next heard the noise, a few minutes later, it was much closer and was definitely heading towards us. One thought seemed to rush into all our minds at the same moment, and it was the thought that the person in that grave was coming to take his revenge on us for disturbing and desecrating it. Everything seemed deathly still and silent except for that loud dragging noise coming from the river directly towards us as we stood in a bunch beside the fire, staring at the path. Then the tall grass suddenly parted and, to a man, every one of us tough Ringers grabbed a firestick from the fire and threw them with all our strength at what was emerging from the

tall grass. We let out a yip and a yell and I think momentarily there was a bit of panic. The firesticks clashed in a great shower of sparks and hot coals flew everywhere setting the grasses and shrubs alight and causing a small bush fire. Out of all the commotion and fire, its feathers all blackened and burnt and looking bedraggled and sick and sorry for itself, staggered an old wood duck! Everything was deathly silent and still for a whole minute, I reckon, then we all broke down laughing our heads off.

Barney

An old mate from the distant past



The last time that we were talking, I think that I was telling you of my friend, Barney, and of some of his many exploits. At this time, in the scheme of things, we were both working on Parakylia Station. One time, Barney and I were sent to check on a far paddock that we had previously removed all the sheep from and put them in a paddock that was closer to the homestead in preparation for shearing. Someone had come through that way and saw a few sheep that we had apparently missed. The overseer instructed Barney and I to go and see if this was indeed true and to count them; and also to clean out the trough at the windmill which was the stock watering place for the paddock. Barney and I saddled up early the next morning and Barney's wife, Dolly, saddled up a horse too and came along for the ride. When we got to the paddock, we split up, Barney and I going around on each side of the paddock while Dolly went through the middle to check for any fresh tracks, and agreed to meet at the windmill. I did not see any fresh tracks on my side of the paddock but there were some sheep at the windmill and by the time Barney and Dolly got there I had already cleaned out the trough and counted the sheep. Barney and Dolly had not seen any more so that appeared to be all there was.

Barney called to me, "Hey, young fellow, did you count the sheep?" and when I replied "Yes", he said "Well, I guess that I had better count them too," and he started. "One, two, three... more over there... and about six there and some more over here," then he turned to me and asked, "Boy, how many did you get?"

"I counted twenty-three, Barney." I replied.

"Yeah," he said. "That's what I got too."

Dolly spoke up then with a laugh, "Hey, Barney, you don't count sheep like that! You have to count them all the way through."

That stopped old Barney in his tracks and looking up to her in disdain, he said, "Shut up. What do you know about counting sheep? You're only a woman!"

Well... That did not go down well with Dolly and she let him know

it. I quickly swung into my saddle and galloped off to count some imaginary sheep that I thought that I could see in the distance. Meanwhile behind me, I could hear the world exploding!



Barney had a way with horses. At the homestead, we had about a mile square paddock into which we used to turn out our working horses during the afternoons when we had finished work for the day. In the mornings, all the stockmen on the station had to take turns to get the horses into the yard early in the morning for the start of the day's work. You can imagine how difficult mustering the horses in that paddock was. Sometimes you had to do it in the dark and you always seemed to miss that favourite horse that you wanted to ride that day. Well, old Barney, being a practical man, had the answer. What he used to do was go to a large sand hill about two or three hundred yards away from the main yards and from on top of that sand hill he used to crack his stockwhip two or three times. He had those horses trained in such a way that when they heard the whip cracks, each and every horse galloped in from every corner of the paddock, straight into the main yards. Most of the time, the rest of us were still in our bunks at that time in the morning and all you could hear was the deafening sound of the drumming and thunder of the horses' hooves in the still morning air. Of course, when it came our turn to get the horses in, we all took a page from Barney's book and took our whips up to the top of that sand hill too. Yes, you could fill a book on tales of Barney and his ways. He certainly was a character.



One of the tasks that seemed to fall to Barney and me on a regular basis was the job of tracking down and getting rid of dingoes that always managed to get through the supposedly dingo-proof fence that the government had put up many years ago across Australia to protect the sheep flocks from wild dogs. This job was given to us, I think, because we were recognised as the only ones with the expertise and special ability to read signs and tracks correctly and to follow them anywhere. A dingo was a problem and a pest to the sheep farmer as it would get into a flock of sheep, mostly at night, and maul and kill six or eight sheep at a time just for the fun of it. During all the time that I was there, Barney and I caught and got rid of every single dingo that wandered onto Parakylia Station. I think mainly because of our vigilance and ability to track and our special knowledge of the bush. Whenever we came across dingo tracks out in the paddocks during the course of a day's work, the next day Barney and I would saddle up our best horses real early

in the morning and track them down until we got them, usually by chasing them down with the horses.

I must admit, however, that there was one dingo that got the better of me. In fact, he got the better of a lot of other dingo hunters and doggers who were far better than I was. He was known by the name of Club Foot and he got that name because he was once caught in a dog trap and he chewed his foot off and got free. It didn't seem to affect his ability to run but he left a distinctive print when he walked. He didn't kill many sheep after his run in with the trap, living mainly on dead carcasses, but he did kill a few. His encounter with the trap, however, turned him into the most cunning of animals and stories of him were legend and were told and retold around many campfires and station get-togethers. I came in contact with him on Andamooka Station, a place I worked at for a few months after coming back from yet another trip up the Birdsville Track. Coming into contact with him might not be quite true because I don't think anybody ever came close to being in contact with old Club Foot. A lot of good men, including me, tried everything to catch him, using poison baits, dog traps and even bringing in other dogs to track him down, but he remained elusive and seemingly out of reach. When the boss gave me the job, I was confident that I would be successful within a week. How wrong I was! I used all my tracking skills and my knowledge of bushcraft. Even when I came across fresh tracks and followed them for hours, he just seemed to disappear and vanish; I lost his tracks on the stretches of stony, rock-hard country along the dog-proof fence that today is the site of the Roxby uranium mine. Station people used to tell stories of how disdainful he became of traps and how a couple of times he actually walked into an area where traps had been laid and set and then, realizing the danger, backtracked, placing his feet exactly on his previous foot prints until he was out of the danger zone and on safe ground. I tried many ruses and wiles to outwit him. One procedure that was usually successful and a dead set certainty, was to bury a dead dog on its back with only just the four paws exposed. Then I would smear heavily poisoned sheep fat on the paws and also strew dog faeces and urine around the area. On seeing something like this, a dog's natural instinct would be of a curious nature and it would immediately go up and sniff and lick the fat on the paws and thus would suffer death by poisoning. Not old Club Foot though... He would sniff from some distance away but would not come close. Eventually, Club Foot died of old age. A boundary rider found his body near the dog-proof fence during a routine check of the fence. He had been dead for over a week. Ironically, I learnt of his death a few years later, from a mate of mine with whom I had worked with at Andamooka and who I met up with again

at the Birdsville races in Queensland. Strangely enough, it made me a little sad because it was like hearing of the death of an old friend.



I don't know if Barney ever worked on Andamooka Station. He may have. I do know that he spent some time at the Andamooka Opal Fields and I think that he had relations there. You know, back then was the good old days where if you knew anything about stock work, you could get a job anywhere and any station would take you on at the drop of a hat. Most of us young fellows in those days would work at a place for a couple of months and then move on while old blokes like Barney tended to stay on for much longer.



Speaking of Barney, here's one last story of my old mate. I think that I told you before that he had a quick wit and a strange sense of humour. One morning there, back on Parakylia, Barney was in the round yard breaking in a young horse for riding. Some of the other stockmen and I were in a nearby yard, shoeing horses and tending to our saddles. The Boss came down from the homestead and was leaning on the rails having a yarn with Barney.

He said "You know what, Barney? It is going to be real hot today."

"How hot, Boss?" Barney asked.

"Oh, I reckon that it is going to be about a hundred and ten degrees in the shade," the Boss replied. It was all Fahrenheit back then. Nearby, under a shady tree, a group of the station's children were playing. A gleam came into old Barney's eye and he came out with this little gem,

"Do us a favour, Boss," he asked.

"What can I do for you, Barney?" the Boss said.

"Well," Barney replied, "Tell those kids to get out of the shade. And tell them to go and play somewhere else where it is cooler." That was old Barney! Never a dull moment whenever he was around.

Madla-Yapa, the Dingo



The last time that we sat down for a yarn I think we talked about dingoes, so I think that might be a good topic for a yarn. We all think of and know the dingo as an intelligent kind of animal. The Aborigines used to get them as pups and train them as companions and for hunting and domestic purposes and valued them so highly that they were never without them. However, I cannot remember seeing any in the Arabana camps of old, although I used to see them on visits to other Aboriginal communities. They were as loyal and trustworthy and as protective as the domesticated dogs of today. I guess that is why Aboriginal people, and definitely the Arabana, enthusiastically embraced the many breeds and types of dogs that the Europeans brought with them, as these dogs made superb hunting dogs, a quality that the Aboriginal people prized. In those days, no individual male Aborigine owned or claimed ownership of a dog. These dogs dramatically changed the hunting techniques and lifestyle of Aborigines. Whereas, in the old days, people used to rely on the prowess and skill of their men using weapons such as spears, boomerangs and throwing sticks to hunt large animals such as kangaroo and emu, now it was much easier for the women themselves to successfully hunt large game using the speed and stamina of these European dogs. However, women were not allowed to actually cook these animals if there were men present. The cooking and the sharing out of the meat amongst family members were always done by the men.



The dingo itself, while a superb hunting dog and killing machine out bush in its own element, was a dismal failure in the domesticated environment of the Aboriginal camp. They were of no use in chasing down game in that environment. It seems that camp life made them lazy and their hunting instinct were subdued and stifled.

Out in the wild, though, was another matter. I have tracked many dingoes and can vouch for what I say is true. A female and a male dingo would work as a team. The female dog would start the chase and would chase the prey all over the place while the male would more or less run in a straight line. The female would ultimately bring the prey back towards the male dog. The result was that the male was always fresher and would arrive

at a point in the chase where he could kill quickly and easily. Using this technique, most of the chases did not last for very long.

As I have previously said, I have had experience and have seen much evidence of the many hunting skills of the dingo. One incident comes readily to mind. My father loved to hunt the dingo and whenever he took holidays from his cooking job on Finnis Springs Station, he would do just that. On one occasion I was with him on a hunting trip just west of Lake Eyre. We had camped at a place called Angus Bore and were going back towards Emerald Springs with our plant of horses. My brother Len and another man had gone hunting through the sand hills nearer to the shores of the lake. My father and I had pulled up and taken the packs off the horses in preparation for a lunch break at a swamp out on the plains and there were no other trees for miles. Len and his mate were to join us there. Anyway, as we were boiling the billy and getting lunch ready, we looked up and saw this white dingo trotting towards us and heading for the shade of the trees of the swamp. What was extraordinary about it all, though, was that behind him came hopping a very tired kangaroo and right behind the kangaroo and keeping it moving trotted a red dingo! The dingoes had chased the poor old kangaroo to exhaustion and were bringing it into the shade of the trees to kill it. Fair dinkum! How is that for intelligence? Of course, us being there spoiled their plans but it was their lucky day because they both escaped with their lives because of the fact that one of them was white. My father was a crack shot but he would not harm the white dog because in the Lake Eyre region every white animal belongs to an invisible and legendary fierce warrior called Winti-pilpa, and he is said to get real angry with anyone interfering with any of his animals. My father shot the kangaroo, however, and we had kangaroo stew for supper that night. It was a bit skinny, as I remember, but was a welcome change from the salt meat and damper.



Talking of animal skills, my uncle Fred once told me an extraordinary tale. He said that he had seen an incident similar to the one with the dingoes, but this involved two large wedge-tailed eagles. Most of the Country west of Lake Eyre is flat with hardly any trees or bushes for that matter. Uncle Fred was out that way mustering cattle when he noticed these eagles acting oddly and dive bombing something on the ground. On having a closer look, he saw that the eagles were swooping in tandem from the air on a very exhausted kangaroo, which they had apparently chased for a long way as the old kangaroo was almost out on his feet and could hardly move. As he had to go back to his cattle, he said that he didn't know what happened eventually,

but he reckoned that the eagles were fully intending to kill that kangaroo. Which is extraordinary, as eagles are not known as hunters in that sense but mainly as carrion eaters and eaters of dead rotting carcasses. Of course, they do hunt small game such as lizards, mice and rabbits and were said to pick up small lambs from the sky, although in all of my time working with sheep, I have not personally seen this.



When I was working up in the channel country of Queensland, which encompassed the flood plains of both the Georgina and the Diamantina rivers, there were lots and lots of dingoes in the region. They used to roam around in family packs of ten, fifteen or twenty dogs and there used to be the ordinary red dog to ones that were totally black, which was a colour unique to the channel country. Strange thing about it all was that although pack members were both black and red, you never saw a black and red dingo. When working on stations up that way and also when on droving trips, I always tried to land the job of horse tailer. We hardly worked around the station homestead but were nearly always out on the run (station property). In the evening of each day when we had finished work, we would hobble out our horses so they could graze during the night. During the course of the night, the horses would wander about two kilometres away from camp in every direction. It was the duty of the horse tailer to get up real early in the morning while it was still quite dark and go bring the horses back to the camp before breakfast so that the stockmen could saddle up for the day's work. Those dogs were always out there but I have not known them to ever pose a threat to a human and they certainly were not a problem to us as we used to go about our business without fear. Anyhow, in those days, when a dingo smelt human scent it would run away in fear. It is a little different out bush these days because the dingoes are not so scared of the human scent. Some bushmen say that is because in modern times, dingoes have crossbred with domesticated dogs that have escaped into the bush and have gone wild and feral, so the dingoes of today have more or less lost their fear of man. To give you an idea of the number of dingoes that were around when I was up in the channel country, just take a note of this: every now and then we used to have to cull the young, wild, unbranded scrub bulls from the herd by shooting them and when we came back the next day, there was nothing left of the bull but bits of skin and some bones. Fair Dinkum! The dogs had made a meal of the carcass and had eaten it all in just the one night. Like I said earlier, the dingoes never bothered us, but they did pose a problem for us at times by attacking and taking young calves from the herd. They would

attack in a group and while the old cow was busy chasing off some dogs coming in on a frontal attack, the others would come from behind and take the poor calf.

Most of us stockmen used to carry .22 calibre rifles on our saddles. This was, like I said before, to cull unwanted scrub bulls but to also shoot dingoes in an effort to keep their numbers down. The Federal Government used to pay a bounty of a pound a head in those days as they too were interested in keeping down dingo numbers right throughout the Australian bush. I guess a pound would be roughly equal in value of five or six dollars in our present-day currency, and seeing that wages for a stockman then were ten pounds a week, the extra money was always welcome. We used to scalp the dingoes that we shot by taking the skin off the dingo's skull, starting from just below the eyes and taking it to the back of the skull which also included the ears. We also took the skin off the tail. This was the proof that the government needed and whereby they paid the bounty. When the scalps were dry and we had a big pile of them, we would then take them to the nearest police station and the police would count them and pay us the money on behalf of the government. Being away out in the back blocks, however, we always had a problem of getting our scalps in and cashing them in for the money. Now in those days, there used to be a mail run between Marree in South Australia and Birdsville in Queensland which used to carry mail, goods and stores for stations along the way. We solved our problem with the scalps by selling them to the mailman for half the value and he then used to collect the full amount from the police stations.



I would like to tell you about a funny incident that happened at Clifton Hills station while I was working there involving a dingo. Clifton Hills was built on high tableland country beside a fast-flowing artesian bore and the drain used to run for about two kilometres down towards the Diamantina River, which ran east of the station. As with all artesian bores up that way, the water coming from the bore head was very hot. I really don't know how hot the temperature of the water was but let me give you an idea. Whenever we wanted to make a billy of tea, all we had to do was just put the tea leaves in the billy and take the water directly from the bore head. It made instant tea! Fair Dinkum! There used to be a small pool of water there right beside the bore head. The main road from Marree to Birdsville went right by the homestead. One day, some travellers, a man and a woman, pulled up at the station on their way up to Birdsville, tourists like. When they opened their car door, their little dog jumped out and decided that it wanted a swim

and headed for the pool near the bore head and jumped straight in. Poor thing! The hot water cooked it instantly and there was hair and skin floating all over the place. That was how hot that water was coming straight from underground and that poor little dog must have had a horrible death.

Anyway, back to the dingo story. It involves my brother-in-law, Percy, who was up that way with a droving plant and they were camped at Clifton Hills waiting for the delivery of their mob of cattle. Away down at the end of that bore drain where the water is cool and drinkable after its hot start from the bore head, Percy had shot a dingo and had removed the scalp and had left the body beside the bore drain. Now, at the station, the manager also kept a small herd of six jersey cows for the purpose of milking to ensure the station's supply of fresh milk. The cows spent most of their time along the drain during the day because there was a lot of green grass growing and there were plenty of trees for shade. Living at the station was a retired, old stockman who was referred to as a cowboy, an outback term for a handyman, and he used to do odd jobs around the homestead, for which he was given board and lodging. One of those jobs was to bring the milking cows in every day before sundown and to put them in a yard where they could be safe from dingoes at night and also for milking in the mornings. On this day he had gone down to the drain as usual and, having rounded up the cows, was on his way home when he saw something strange disappear behind a stand of tall bulrushes that grew beside the banks of the drain. This aroused his curiosity and he decided to go and have a look but when he came around the end of those bulrushes, he wished he hadn't, for what he saw standing in front of him turned the blood in his veins to ice! Standing there was the most hideous and fearsome creature that he could ever have imagined in his wildest nightmares. Its huge bulging eyes seemed to be almost falling out of its sockets and the top of its smooth head was ghastly white and seemed to be covered with dried blood and where its ears should have been there were just two large holes that seemed to be constantly dripping blood. Its cruel mouth was half open in a hideous snarl and its teeth looked sharp and awesome. The hair on its body was short and stiff and covered with dried blood. With a piercing yell, old Johnny snapped out of his frozen state, and forgetting about the cows, he ran for the homestead as fast as he could. He had gone to fetch the cows as he always did, on foot. When he reached the homestead, he was babbling, and we could not make out a word of what he was saying. He was a real mess and out of breath. A couple of us went down to the drain to see what we could see of what had put old Johnny into the state that he was in. We found the dingo that Percy had shot earlier in the day still walking about. Well... tottering would be a better word, I guess.

Obviously, Percy had not quite killed it and it had revived and got back on to its feet so we did the humane thing and mercifully dispatched it. I don't think old Johnny ever forgave Percy for that experience!



I owned a dingo once. Well, I guess the right thing to say would be that I sort of inherited it. I used to work for the Commonwealth Railways at a place called Wangiana (which means 'yandying' in Arabana) on the Central Australian narrow-gauge railway line and I was in charge of maintenance for a large section of track. In one of my camps, I had a cook by the name of Phil, an English man. He was about six feet and a passable cook by bush standards, I guess. I don't know where he got it from but when he arrived to start work at Wangiana, he had this pup with him. It was part dingo and part bitser. You know, the Heinz variety sort, 57 different varieties! Sometimes when Phil got drunk, he used to stand out on the veranda and play his violin and he was not bad at it too. The young dingo used to sit at his feet and howl his head off and used to make the rest of us laugh. Phil used to have a piece of steel rail hanging up on the veranda and he used to bang it to let us know that it was mealtime. Every time that Phil struck the piece of rail with another piece of steel and caused a ringing sound, the dingo would run from wherever he was and sit and howl under the bell. When Phil resigned and left the camp, he left the dingo behind, and that is how I came to inherit it. Ding, we used to call it. Not very original, I know, but it used to answer to the name. It was not a bad dog but was very strong willed and when you disciplined him, he would snarl and want to fight back. It was the dingo blood coming out in him, I guess. Wangiana was in the middle of sheep country so it was definitely the wrong place to have a dingo. He was content to stay around the camp and did not wander. But it had to happen. This weekend we were all in camp and it was a Saturday. Anyway, we were having a few drinks that afternoon and decided to have a game of cards. Our accommodation was a long, large, one-storey building with two bunks in each room, with a total of six rooms. Right in the middle was a room that we used as a common room and it had a door that opened out towards the front and one that opened out towards the back. There was a fence around the front half of the building that faced the railway line with a gate. Seeing that it was a fairly warm afternoon, we left the front and back doors open so that any breeze could blow in; there was no air-conditioning in those old buildings in those days. We put a ground sheet and a blanket right in the middle on the floor to have a game of cards and so we sat on the floor and got very involved with the game. Suddenly, there was this wild commotion and a sheep came hurtling

through that open front door and smack bang through the centre of our card game, scattering cards, money and blokes left right and centre. Right behind the sheep came the young dingo charging at top pace, looking very pleased with itself. Apparently, it had been out that afternoon chasing and rounding up sheep, had brought a small mob back to the cottages, singled out one, and skilfully guided it through the gate and into the house. It was pandemonium for a while. Unfortunately for the dog, its little adventure and excursion into the paddocks had been noticed by the owner of the property who arrived shortly afterwards, kicking up a right old ruckus and demanding something be done about that dingo. I could not find it in my heart to do it, but I gave my rifle to one of the men with instructions to take the dog for a walk and put it down. And that was the end of poor old Ding.

Horses, Packs and Saddles



It has been a while since we sat down for a yarn. I have either been too busy or suffering from a lack of inclination and motivational inspiration, or maybe it's just another sign of old age. No matter.



I was reminiscing the other day with an old mate of mine, a stockman from a bygone era. We talked of the days we spent in the cattle camps of the many stations where we had worked in our youth and of the many droving trips throughout the vast outback to just about everywhere. He commented on the many hours that we must have spent in the saddle during that time and the fact that we never complained, taking it as part of life as we knew it. It was all horses, packs and saddles in those days. The Land Rover, Toyota, motorbikes and the mustering helicopter have only recently been introduced in modern times for the work on the stations but, of course, are now part and parcel of how work is done on most of the bigger stations along with CB radios and GPS services. We often used to be up out of our swags long before dawn and be in the saddle for most of the day or until our work was done and often unsaddling our horse at or after sundown.



Besides being a Mission, Finnis Springs was a station property that ran both sheep and cattle, so nearly all of us boys that grew up there were well versed in stock work. At an early age, we learnt how to break in and handle horses and were competent in all aspects of stock work. To 'break in' a horse in modern day language is called 'horse whispering'; I often wonder where they got that term from. How the old stockmen and ringers from my era would have laughed and made jokes of that! It was hard work. All of us boys were good riders but so were some of the girls from Finnis Springs too. I have always felt it strange that while we boys went on to work on stations, none of the girls ever did. I guess that it just was not the done thing in those days. Not that there was a total lack of girls in stock work because there were some bloody good ringers, who happened to be girls, working at the time on family-owned properties and family-owned droving plants.

In my youth, I would hear stories of an Aboriginal girl who used to work on Mundowdna Station, just east of Marree. From all accounts, she was a very capable stockman and could ride with the best of them. In my time, I have met and known many females who have worked with stock in the harsh conditions of the outback and have always been up to the task. A couple of girls come to mind. I met them in my early teens on the Birdsville Track. We were about the same age and they were part of their father's droving plant. We passed them on the Track at Thulkalina while coming up from Marree. We were going to Glengyle Station in Queensland with a plant of horses to pick up a mob of cattle to truck at Quilpie and they were taking a mob of fat cattle down to Marree to truck to market in Adelaide. We were just young bush kids and only met briefly but we were friends right off. Unfortunately, there is a tragic twist to this story because I never saw my friends again. While still in Queensland, I heard that one of the girls had died in an accident. They were on another droving trip and the mailman who regularly took mail and goods between Marree and Birdsville was passing them somewhere on the Track. One of the girls was riding a young skittish horse that had just recently been broken in and the mailman blew the horn on his truck in greeting as he went past the mob of cattle. The young horse took fright and suddenly reared up and surprisingly unseated the girl. She fell and hit her head on some rocks and sadly died from severe head trauma injuries before they could get proper medical aid.



Most Aboriginal stockmen did not bother themselves in competing in organised events such as rodeos but were expert riders nevertheless and it would have taken an exceptionally good horse to throw them from the saddle. Out on the stations and amongst themselves, however, the young fellers were always competitive and were forever trying to outdo the next bloke. On every station there was always that one unrideable horse and we were always challenging visiting stockmen to have a go and try their luck. This, more often than not, resulted in said stockmen being unceremoniously dumped in the dust, much to our amusement. I remember one such horse on a station in far western Queensland. Lipstick was her name and she was a nice-looking bay mare, but there was nothing nice about Lipstick. Many a ringer had tried but nobody could stay on her back and she had thrown them all and as such, was the pride and joy of the boys who worked there. I had just finished a droving trip but had blown my wages in the nearby town, so I signed on the station for a few weeks to get travel money so that I could go on to the next job. It seemed that Lipstick had a bit of a reputation and was

known far and wide. At any rate, the boys dared me to have a go and, not being backward in any way in those days, I accepted the challenge. I will always remember that ride. That little mare could really buck and twisted and turned in every direction and really shook me up. No, I did not get thrown and after what appeared to be an eternity, Lipstick stopped and just stood there, quivering with exhaustion, with both man and horse lathered in sweat. The amazing thing, though, was that I was sitting there hanging on for dear life to the pommel of the saddle with both hands. She had bucked so hard and furiously that she had bucked the bridle clean off her head and I was just sitting there with not even the reins in my hands. True story!

Anyhow, that started off my reputation in the outback and after that, any man with an untameable or unrideable horse was always challenging me. There was this instance at Farina, just south of Marree, where a sheep property owner had this young horse that someone had broken in some time prior that he was having trouble with. He was a big, strong-looking horse and had become a bit savage, as he would not allow anyone in the yard with him and he would rush up and try to attack you. Another stockman and I were in Farina at this time to truck a small mob of fat cattle from Mundowdna Station to the markets in Adelaide. I was asked to try my luck, with a warning from the station owner that this horse had thrown every rider who had so far tried and many a good man had. We could not get a saddle on him short of throwing him to the ground and hog tying him, so we put him in the chute. After the saddle was in place and everything tied down, I climbed aboard and called for the gate to the chute to be opened and carefully watching that my legs were clear of the sides, we let him out into the open confines of the round yard. And that is where the world exploded and the volcano erupted. He bucked and twisted with dynamic energy, grunting and squealing all the while and coming down on all four hooves with such force that I felt as though my intestines were coming out of my mouth. He bounced and bounded high into the air and turned and twisted this way and that and I felt myself leaving the saddle many times but I somehow stayed on. A ringer sitting and watching from atop the rails of the yard commented afterwards that there was so much space and daylight between me and the saddle that he swore that he could see Marree many miles away in the distance! Well... I don't think that it was that bad. The horse settled down a bit after that and the blokes opened the main gates and although he bucked a bit more, he was alright and I took him for a long gallop in the open paddock. The last that I heard of that horse, many weeks after, was that he had turned out to be a good and useful horse.

There were many more horses like that on other stations where I

worked but it was just part of life and, being young, a lot of us thought of it as fun. There was another time at Windorah in Queensland that often comes to mind. I was angry about it at the time but I laugh about it now. We were taking a large mob of fat cattle from Glengyle Station on the Georgina River to Quilpie to truck to markets down south. We stopped over at the town of Windorah on the Cooper Creek to rest the cattle for a day. We always had spare cattle in the herd and our usual practice when passing towns or settlements was to slaughter a bullock for meat and share it with the town. Actually, they always got most of the meat. This was a common practice with us drovers. For instance, whenever we took fat cattle into Marree to truck, we used to trade one full bullock for a sheep with old Alan Crombie, who used to own the sheep station there. It was always great changing our diet from beef to mutton. Drovers were normally given a certain number of cattle at the start of a droving trip for the purposes of a meat supply. What most drovers habitually did, however, was to pick up extra cattle on the way and add them to the mob. This was an insurance policy, if you like, to replace any cattle that might happen to get lost or die on the trip and so that you arrive at your destination with the same amount of cattle that you started out with. Also, they were an extra source for a food supply. Anyway, back to the yarn of the incident at Windorah. We slaughtered and butchered the bullock at sundown at our camp a couple of miles out of town and the local sergeant of police came out to give us a hand and also, of course, to get some fresh beef. Little did he know that it was one of our extras! Most of us took time off during various times of the day to visit the local watering hole. The upshot of this was that I and another drover got challenged to ride a couple of rogue horses. So the next morning, my mate and I rocked up in front of the local pub at the appointed time to find that a large crowd had already gathered. The horses were already saddled and, although they were lively, they were firmly held with ropes around their necks. 'Piece of cake,' I thought. Yeah, little did I know... As I was readying to mount the horse chosen for me, an old man standing close by said, "Watch out, young fellow, this horse will throw you and trample on you to boot." I swung into the saddle quickly and confidently, before all hell broke loose and I was launched into outer space. However, I didn't last in the saddle for very long and was soon rolling in the dust, much to the delight and cheers of the crowd. What made me angry was that I found out soon afterwards that someone had partly cut the stirrup leathers and they had given way during the ride. Well, you can't win them all, so the saying goes.



Yeah, we spent some good times in the bush and stock camps in those days but there were bad times too. I remember one time when I was working on Clifton Hills Station and we had to take this mob of horses from Cooncherie waterhole, which is on the bend of the Diamantina River, over to Cooriminchina waterhole on Cooper's Creek. I forget now how far it was but it was a bloody long way and took us over three days. The country between the two rivers is dry and arid with miles and miles of stony plains and hardly a tree worthy of the name in sight. It was summertime but we had to move these horses because most of the waterholes on the Diamantina were drying up and they would have all perished if we had left them there. As it was, *we* nearly perished going over. The horses were in poor condition so we could not travel with any kind of speed. There were seven of us ringers in the camp as we were planning to muster and brand cattle once we got to the Cooper. Both of our water canteens had run dry and we were getting mighty thirsty and so were the horses. We were heading for a large swamp which was never known to go dry so we were not unduly worried. In years gone by, there used to be a large settlement and depot there and it was a place where they used to shoe the bullocks that they used in the big wagons, hauling goods and material from South Australia into Queensland. As a consequence, the place was called Queuing Pen. We were all in bad shape when we got there and, to our horror, the large swamp was dry. That is, except for a small pool of water out in the middle, less than a foot deep, and in this pool were two dead bullock carcasses. Apparently, they had got bogged whilst getting a drink and could not get out. There was nothing else for it but to beat back our thirst-crazed horses while we filled our canteens with the smelly, green water before we could let them have their drink. The Cooper was still more than twenty miles away but we were far too weak to travel any further that day, so we made camp and boiled the water to make it drinkable. The next day we made it to Cooriminchina on Cooper's Creek and a more welcome sight you could never imagine! Cooriminchina means 'shining eyes' in the local Aboriginal language (Yawarawarka) and there was this big waterhole in front of us, filled to the brim and the afternoon sun shining on its surface. To us thirsty travellers, it was an apt description. Although there had not been any local rain for months, Cooper's Creek had recently flowed with floodwaters from its headwaters far away.

As you can see, living and working out in the bush always tests your survival skills and as a result, you find many a good bushman out here in the country. Men who could take you anywhere with an unerring sense of direction and not only that but could find water where there appeared to be none and food when there seemed to be nothing around at all. Being

Aboriginal and having grown up in the outback, we were natural bushmen and although the living was tough, we were comfortable with our lot. I guess some people today would marvel at some of the things we used to do but at the time we took it all for granted. Part of life, as it were.

Of course, one of the aspects of bushcraft is the ability to track. Having this ability nearly got me into trouble once. This happened on my time working on Clifton Hills Station. We were camped about ten miles south of the station at a place called Barwon Swamp, just east of the Fish Hole on the outskirts of the Diamantina River. There were about seven of us ringers in camp and we were just spelling our horses. We were preparing to go over to Kanowna on Coopers Creek to muster cattle and brand calves. In the meantime, we were mending our saddles and pack bags, shoeing horses and waiting for word from the station to go. When we did get the message to go, we were up early and planning that night to camp at Mick's Hole, a waterhole in a creek over forty miles away. We had about forty horses in our plant and our horse tailer (the man in charge of the horses) had got the horses in nice and early, but there were five or six horses missing. No problems. After we had eaten breakfast, saddled, packed up and started on our way, the horse tailer went out to look for them with the intention of catching up with us at the dinner camp at midday. One of the missing horses was a 'bronco horse' and we needed him when we were branding calves and cleanskins on the Cooper, and old Ralph was one of the best around. A 'bronco horse' is a horse that has been specially trained to pull up calves on a rope when you are branding. When a large group of horses are hobbled and let go to graze for an evening, they tend mostly to break up into small groups that like to stay together and they also tend to spread out over a large area during the course of the night. That is why bells are placed around the necks of certain horses of known groups so it makes it easier for the horse tailer to locate them in the early darkness of morning when he goes to fetch them in for the day's work. I suppose that we were about halfway to Mick's Hole when we stopped and made dinner camp and the horse tailer did indeed catch up with us there, but he didn't have any horses. Searched and searched, he reckoned, but could not find them. So the head stockman comes over to me and says, "Boy, we really need that bronco horse. Go back and see if you can find them."

It was past midday when I saddled up a fresh horse and started back at a gallop. On arriving back at our previous camp, I decided that my best bet would be to track the missing horses but the problem that arose straightaway was the fact that we had been there for a while and there were tracks everywhere. I knew that I did not have too much daylight left, so I went over the whole area surrounding our old camp at a gallop, looking for

fresh tracks hopefully made the night before. I was helped in this by the fact that there was a mare with a foal in the missing group. When I discovered tracks that I thought could be of the missing horses, I followed them again at a gallop, a technique that I had learnt in Queensland, and although they had meandered around a bit during the night, I eventually found them in a grassy hollow beside the river. I un-hobbled them, headed out and reached the dinner camp at just on sundown. The head stockman had left me a neck bag of water and after having a drink, I changed riding horses and started on their trail, driving the horses in front of me. However, I could only do this for about an hour before it got too dark to see and I lost their tracks. It was a moonless night and out there the stony featureless plains stretch for miles broken up by small dry swamp areas. Suddenly, I had a decision to make: either make camp here for the night and wait for the morning or trust my instincts and bush skills and head for Mick's Hole. Looking around in the light of the stars, I could see that there were no visible identifying features to guide me, just flat stony plain and more stony plain. Being a confident sort of a guy – in those days, at least – I headed through the night and drove the horses towards Mick's Hole. After what seemed like hours and hours of riding, I started to admit to myself that perhaps, only just perhaps, I might be a little bit lost. So at the next small swampy ground, I decided to make camp and see what the morning might bring. I unsaddled the horse that I was riding and caught another and tethered it to a tree and re-hobbled the rest, and with the saddle cloth, I made a bed close by, using the saddle for a pillow. The night was dark and mostly still except for a light, intermittent breeze. Although I was tired, I couldn't get to sleep. And as I lay there, I could hear the clink of hobble chains as the horses grazed nearby and the usual night sounds like the chirping of crickets and the occasional call of a distant night bird but there was something bothering me and I could not fathom what it was. Then I heard it. A very faint sound far away. It was the sound of a horse bell. None of the horses that I had with me had a bell. I was up in a flash and saddled my horse and un-hobbled the rest and headed for the camp beside the waterhole that we called Mick's Hole. When I rode in and dismounted, our camp cook said to me, "I knew that you would be in tonight, boy, so I have put your quart pot on the fire to boil so you that could make some tea and have even saved you some stew in the camp oven".

Let me tell you something for nothing, I was bloody glad to get into my own swag that night and, surprisingly, I slept like a log.

My Sister, Redwing



In one of our earlier yarns, I think that I mentioned the strange event of when my young sister Redwing, who has since changed her name to Olive, came to be found one night across the creek at Gudnampanha which is near Curdimurka beside Lake Eyre. The North Creek, sometimes called the Margaret, had been flowing for a week or more but at that time was still running strongly and everybody was wondering how a three-year-old girl could cross a deep, fast-flowing creek like that and still survive. I was speaking to my sister Olive just the other day. Now in her seventies, frail and weak from sickness but still with a steely glint in her eyes, she says that she can still remember that event, though somewhat poorly. Someone asked me recently if my sister had some sort of ‘Special Powers’. I know how Olive would react to that question. She would laugh out loud and say, “What Special Powers? The only psycho here is you!” She is, though, a unique sort of person, very perceptive and alert and she still has, in her grasp, the knowledge and understanding of the old ways and customs and stories from long ago.

For some time now, I have been meaning to tell you a sequel to that Gudnampanha story but have not got around to it. I guess that now is as good a time as any.

About ten or fifteen years ago now, I can’t quite remember when, I took some time off from work to visit Olive who now lives near Menindee in New South Wales. On my way down in my Toyota, I stopped at Gudnampanha with the intention of going across the creek there to visit the old community in which both Olive and I spent much of our early childhood. But things have changed there in a big way from what it used to be in the old days. Gone is the wide, sandy creek bed lined with river gums. Even the site where the camp used to be has all eroded away and seems to be now much higher and taller than what it was when we lived there. The creek itself is narrower and deeper and salt from nearby Lake Eyre has contaminated the soil and made it boggy and intractable. The salt has also killed off the old river gums and now only ti-trees and salt-tolerant acacia trees remain. Anyhow, I tried to get to the old camp from the north side and tried to cross the flood out plain of the Margaret Creek where the old road used to go but found my way blocked by salt and deep mud. I thought, then, to come in from the south

side but, again, found my way blocked by deep, salty mud and a dense, thick growth of ti-trees and undergrowth and besides there was deep water all the way along the creek. Not to be deterred, I parked my Toyota and tried to find a way to the old camp site on foot but had to give up the idea in the end due to the thick undergrowth and deep boggy mud. So I went back to where I had parked my Toyota and seeing that it was about lunch time, I decided to make a couple of sandwiches, but because of the flies, I had to sit in the Toyota to eat them. While sitting there, I noticed what seemed to be an odd-looking object about a hundred metres to the left of where I was parked. It seemed to be just sticking up from the ground as if someone had placed it there. Anyway, I finished my sandwiches and packed everything away and before continuing my journey, and out of curiosity, I thought that I would go over and see what that object was. To my surprise, I found that that object was a genuine Aboriginal artefact and was, in fact, a scraper that the old people used to fashion out of stone to finish off work on boomerangs, spears and other wooden weapons and utensils. I have seen many of them but somehow this one looked a little different and to me, seemed maybe to have other uses.

On that trip I went to many places, among them Finnis Springs, Marree and Pt Augusta, and I asked a lot of Arabana people what they could tell me about that stone. Many of them were senior people and knowledgeable, but they all told me the same thing, that it was a scraper and finisher of wood. Well, I already knew that. When I reached Menindee, and having spent a couple of days there, I thought that I would show that object to Olive. Now I deliberately did not tell her what it was or where I got it from because I wanted to be clever and let her tell me.

She looked at it for a minute or two and then handed it back to me saying simply "Take it back to where you got it from and leave it there."

Acting smart, I said, "Ah ha! But from where did I get it?"

Her reply knocked me flat and took my breath away. "You got it at Gudnampanha," she said matter-of-factly.

"How did you know that?" I asked in sheer amazement. What she said then left me speechless and at a loss for words.

"If you look on one side you will see a paw print," she said without elaborating any further. I can tell you honestly that of the many people that I showed that stone to, no one saw or noticed, and that includes myself, that imprint of a paw print or commented on it. Yet there it was! I can not to this day explain that but that's my sister Redwing!

Now Olive would say that I was dreaming or that I urgently needed

to see a psychologist but I have a theory or a thought if you like. Do you remember my story of her being found across the flooded creek at Gudnampanha one night when she was three? And do you remember my yarn about the myth of the big black dog with red eyes who roams around the area of Gudnampanha on moonless nights? I wonder if it was that big black dog that took care of Redwing and kept that little girl safe that night that she crossed that fast flowing creek so many years ago now. Makes you stop and wonder, huh?

That was not the only time that the 'Spirits' looked after Redwing. We Arabana are great believers in Spirits and firmly believe that Spirits are always interacting with the living in many ways. There are bad Spirits that make you ill and lead you astray and there are good Spirits that look after you and keep you safe from harm.

On this occasion, we had gone on a short hunting trip east of Finnis Springs into the foothills of the ranges there. Just a family group consisting of myself, Mum, my two sisters and brother, and two Aboriginal grandmothers and we were of course, on foot. Redwing was being smart to Mum and being disobedient. So Mum went to give her a clip under the ear but Redwing ducked and took off running. Mum then yelled at me, "Sydney, catch that girl and bring her back to me. I want to give her a big hiding." So I started chasing her as she headed towards the ranges and I guess that I could have caught her in the first hundred yards or so but I was feeling sorry for her and did not run as fast as I should have. When I did start running in earnest, she was a long way ahead of me and I had no hope of catching her then as she was a pretty good runner herself. I was starting to panic by this time because up ahead there were high hills and deep gullies and the area was thick with scrub. So I started yelling at her, alternatively begging her to stop and then, threatening to flog her if she didn't. It was to no avail and I had to give up in the end and breathing hard and out of breath, I went back to tell Mum that I could not catch her.

So I got a couple of clips under the ear for my troubles and we hurried back to Finnis Springs to get help. A search party was quickly organised and two of our best trackers who both possessed keen eyesight, mounted up on horses and headed into the hills. There was a little more than two hours of daylight left before sundown. They came back just as it was getting dark and sorrowfully admitted that they could not find her. Oh, they had found her tracks alright and followed them into deep creeks and gorges but lost them in the hard rocky ground and could not find them again. They tried calling out to her but without any success. Everybody was at a loss of what to do next and there was a lot of crying. The moon came up very late and the night was

at its blackest. A few hours later as we were sorrowfully sitting around the fire wondering whatever to do next and worrying about her, Redwing calmly walked into the light of the fire. Although I was greatly relieved and happy to see her, I could not but help thinking, ‘Oh boy, you are going to get a big hiding now’. But everybody jumped up in joy and all began hugging her at the same time and making a big fuss over her. Redwing looked bemused and looked as if she did not know what all the fuss was about. Everybody was talking in amazement the next day of how a girl as young as Redwing was could navigate the hills at the foot of the ranges, with its deep creeks and gullies and thick scrub, and come safely home in the dark. There were murmurs then that there was more to her than met the eye or that maybe there was something else.



Her understanding, feeling and connection to the old Arabana ways and customs is still with her, as is her knowledge of things that would seem extraordinary to the rest of us. A couple of years ago, I again was on a visit to her home at Sunset Strip, near Menindee. I can’t remember now, but it must have been school holiday time because two of her daughters were camping on the banks of the Darling River with their families, fishing and catching yabbies. So Redwing and I, together with her husband Graham decided to go and join them and spend a night at their camp. We spent a pleasant day there and the afternoon was bright and sunny with hardly a cloud in the sky. It was late in the afternoon, when two of her teenage grandchildren ran up to Redwing excitedly saying, “Look, Grandma, there is a star in the sky!”

Redwing looked up to where they were pointing but didn’t say anything.

“Maybe it is a jet with the sun shining on it” I offered.

However, after watching it for a while, we concluded that it was indeed a star. Then Redwing did something extra ordinary by calling her granddaughters to her and, with an arm around their shoulders, saying, “You should remember this. That star is telling your great uncle there (pointing to me) and I that one of our very close relatives has passed away.”

The girls were impressed but I was somewhat bemused. Anyway, the next day when we returned to her home at Sunset Strip, there were more than half a dozen calls on her message bank, all of them urgent, all of them saying the same thing. One of her favourite nephews, the one that she endearingly called Boxhead had died suddenly of a stroke. Well, make of that whatever you will but it is a true story.

I guess that there are many stories like these that I could tell you of my sister, Redwing, but I think that I will leave off for now.

If you are wondering how Olive got the name of Redwing, well she had red hair as child and as a baby, of course, and also at the time that she was born, my father's favourite song was 'Redwing'!

Oh, by the way, I did not take that stone scraper back to Gudnampanha as I was told to. I still have it. It is all wrapped up tight to keep the Spirits at bay but if they have anything to do with my sister Olive, (Redwing) I know that I am pretty safe.

Just don't tell her, that's all.

Me and the Railways



I was born on and grew up on a property that ran both sheep and cattle. All I ever knew from birth was the life of a stockman. And like every other Arabana who grew up on Finnis Springs Mission, I was very good at it.

I joined the Railways by accident, I guess.

A relative of mine, Clem, had an agreement with the manager of Cordillo Downs just up over the border of South Australia and Queensland to break in a large mob of horses in the New Year. He asked me if I was interested in going up and giving him a hand. It was Christmas time and we were at Finnis Springs Mission. Dead broke. Both without a job. We came up with the idea of getting a job with the Railways for a few weeks to get some money so we could catch the mail truck up to Cordillo Downs. So we go into Marree and front up to the Roadmaster's office and sign up. The requirement then was to go down to Pt Augusta to pass a medical examination before being assigned to a fettlers' camp somewhere along the narrow gauge line to Alice Springs. We were both issued with free passes. However, on the night that we were both to catch the slow mixed train down to Pt Augusta, I went to a party and got so drunk that I missed the train completely. Clem went, of course. On his own.

A couple of days after, when I had sobered up, I again fronted up to the Roadmaster's office in Marree and they gave me a pass with the instructions to go to Leigh Creek to do my medical and then proceed to the fettlers camp at Curdimurka. On this instance, I did what was asked of me, and having passed the medical, duly turned up at Curdimurka to start work. This suited me, as I knew the area around Curdimurka fairly well. There were two gangs at Curdimurka at that time. One looked after twenty-five miles of track to the north and the other looked after twenty five miles to the south. The bonus for me was that the men in charge of the gangs, as gangers, were both Arabana. Lenny Stuart was the ganger of the northern gang and his father, Laurie, was the ganger of the southern gang. I joined Lenny Stuart's gang on the northern section which suited me fine as this section included Coward Springs where we could get the occasional carton of beer. In those days, it was big bottles in a box of a dozen. Coward Springs had been a famous pub in days gone

by but its licence had expired. Roy Lewitzki, a noted outback character, was there at that time and we had an understanding with him. Roy was an expert leather worker and saddler and was a son-in-law to the famous Kidman manager at Anna Creek, Archie McLean – a very well-known bushman. Roy Lewitzki was a very old man at that time.

Meanwhile, Clem had gone to Pt Augusta alright as intended but had got romantically entangled with a local girl and had forgotten about his medical. He was a good looking lad, my mate. Worse still, after a short while, he dumped the local girl for a pretty young lady who was visiting Pt Augusta from Silverton, west of Broken Hill in New South Wales. The upshot of it all was that when she went home, Clem also followed. 'Not to worry,' I thought when I heard about it all, 'I will work here for a fortnight or maybe a month then collect my pay, follow him over to Silverton and maybe then we could still go on that horse-breaking contract'. Unfortunately, things didn't work out that way. I had been only working as a fettler for a little more than a fortnight when I got the grim news. Clem had taken on a job at Silverton, a job that he loved – breaking in horses. Clem was a reputable rider, as good as any I'd seen, and he was an outstanding horseman. The stockyards that he had been working in were made from lengths of discarded railway line. He was riding the horse that he had been handling in that yard when it somehow suddenly reared up, slipped and fell, causing Clem to hit his head heavily against the railing as horse and rider came down. That fall was fatal. The news when I heard it sickened me and I felt great loss. It also placed me at the crossroads. I could not go up to Cordillo Downs then and take on the horse-breaking job as the contract was in his name. So I said to myself, 'What the heck, I'll stay on in the Railways for a while and see what I could do with myself later on'. Little did I know then that 'later on' would stretch into forty years or more.



Curdimurka was not the first time that I was employed by the Commonwealth Railways. I don't know what year it was but it rained and rained and there were floods and volumes of water everywhere. The Railways were badly affected by flooding and washaways. At a place called Canterbury Creek ('Kidni-pirrinha', which means 'tail of scorpion' in Arabana), the floods had washed away almost a mile of track and it ended up about two or three hundred yards away from its original bed all in a mess of tangled and twisted metal and broken sleepers. The Commonwealth Railways sent out an urgent call for manpower in all directions for help in repairing the damages to the line. Finnis Springs Mission was close by so

they desperately asked for men to come and help. I was still going to school then. Six or seven men volunteered to go and, I don't know how, it must have been school holiday time, but I also went along. We all joined up at Alberrie Creek which was our nearest Railway siding. After a couple of days working on washaways and washouts to the north and south of Alberrie Creek, we were shifted to the big one at Canterbury Creek. The Railways set up a big camp at Wangiana Siding which was about ten miles from the site. A large team of about forty or fifty men set about the task of repairing the track. A completely new bed had to be prepared for the permanent way and new rail and new sleepers put in for a mile or so. It was hard work and mostly was done by pick and shovel.

It was here that I met my first 'New Australian'. I had never met or seen any foreign men before, not even Germans or Italians. Of course, I had heard of them, like in school and such. Most of the foreign men who worked there came out to Australia from the Baltic States in Europe and were referred to as 'Balts'. It took us the best part of a fortnight to repair the track enough to let a train to pass over. The bloke in charge then brought us back to Alberrie Creek by section car and we walked back into Finnis Springs from there. A few weeks after, we had to go into Alberrie Creek again to meet the slow mixed train (the Chaser) that ran weekly to Alice Springs and which was also the pay train to collect our pay. We all felt like as if we were millionaires!

I spent three or four years at Curdimurka in which time I managed to buy a second-hand short wheelbase Land Rover and we used to go everywhere in that. I got promoted to ganger and was transferred to Wangiana to start up the gang there as the previous one had elapsed. On weekends, we used to go into Marree about twenty-five miles away but sometimes we used to go back to Finnis Springs. At that time, most people were starting to drift away and move into towns like Marree or Pt Augusta. Then in early 1964 I got itchy feet and put in for a transfer to Alice Springs. After initial opposition from my roadmaster and engineer-in-charge, I finally got permission from the Chief Engineer for a transfer to the gang in Alice Springs yard.

I arrived in Alice Springs on the 16th of May 1964. There were only about five thousand people in the Alice in those days and everybody knew everybody and it was a real friendly place. As I was a fully qualified ganger and had my papers and qualifications, the Railways were reluctant to leave me as a fettle in the Alice Springs yard gang. It was not long before I was moving up and down the line working at various places and locations as a trouble-shooter and as a stand in for other gangers. So I was away from the Alice quite a bit working on different sections of track that were a concern

to the powers that be in Pt Augusta and working out problems with staff and personnel. Of course, there were Roadmasters who generally supervised all this but they did not do any actual physical work. I was stationed at Rodinga for a while when I again decided on a change of scenery so I put in for a transfer to the Mechanical Branch as this would then leave me permanently in Alice Springs. I was then with the Civil Engineering Branch. My application, however, was refused so I had a little argument with my engineer-in-charge. 'Stuff this,' I thought, so I came into the Alice and applied for a job at the loco sheds, which at that time employed just under a hundred men. I went back to Rodinga and put in my fortnight's notice after which I came back into town and started work in the loco sheds as a lifter's (wagon fitter) offsider.

All this was in the old Commonwealth Railways days. There were principally three main departments. The Civil Engineering department, the Mechanical Engineering department and the Transport Section. The heads of the departments were all responsible to the Commonwealth Railways Commissioner. Everything ran fairly well and the Railways, as a whole, was like a big family.

I progressed from being an offsider to be a fully qualified lifter and worked at that for a while. I had another change in job description when I was successful in my application for the vacant position of wagon painter. Most rolling stock and wagons had to be repaired, repainted and re-lettered every three years or so. Mostly all rolling stock were painted in the colour red with white letters and numbers. I worked at that for a time but found that it was a dirty, messy kind of job so when the position of Train Lighting Examiner became vacant, I put in an application for it. The Train Lighting Examiner was responsible for all lighting in brake vans and carriages and this included the carriages on the passenger train, the Ghan. The Ghan, of course, always had a power van attached which generated power throughout the train but the brake vans and carriages on slow, mixed goods trains. Other trains relied on a bank of twelve two-volt batteries, carried on the carriage itself, for lighting and power. It was up to the train lighting examiner to maintain these and keep them in good working order to provide lighting and power. I worked at the train lighting job for some time before moving back to the loco sheds to work again as a lifter (wagon fitter). It was hard work and noisy, I guess. My mates and colleagues gave me the nickname of *Banga* because I was always banging on something. It was a take, I think, from my surname, *Strangways*, as they also sometimes called me *Stranga*.

During my time working there, the Railways changed its name from the Commonwealth Railways, formed itself into a Commission and called

itself the Australian National. To many of the old workers and people around, the Commonwealth Railways was referred to as Charlie Riley and it was not uncommon to hear old railway people say, "I am working for Charlie Riley". As the Commonwealth Railways, the railway was heavily subsidised by the Australian Government. As a commission, it started to make its own way and began to make a profit in its own right. In the late 1980s or the early 1990s, when everything seem to be going well, the powers that be down south (the Commonwealth Government, I think) decided in their wisdom to privatise the Railways and sold it off to private concerns. Gave it away free, some people said.

A lot of the old railway men, in disgust, left in great numbers and the new owners were forced to hire and recruit new personnel. A lot of us were offered redundancy packages and I left the services of the Railways in 1994. Pretty sad day, really. A few of the men who were made redundant signed up again with the new owners who called themselves the National Railways. But life in the service of the Railways was never the same again. It had lost its feel of identity.

Thanthi's Story



My name is Amanda Watts. Just the other day I was sitting yarning with my Thanthi. This is an Aboriginal term of the Arabana tribe which identifies him as a brother of my maternal grandmother. In Aboriginal kinship terms, my paternal grandmother's brother would be identified as Kadnhini. In European kinship terms, I guess they would both be my great uncles. Anyway, I was chatting with my thanthi about family and asked if he could remember something about my grandparents and this is the story he told me...

My sister Sheila and I were very close. She was my second sister and was three or four years older than me. There were six children in our family. Vera was the eldest, followed by Bert, then Sheila, after whom was me, then there was Olive – the redheaded one whom everybody all called Redwing as a child – and last of all was Leonard, but most people knew him as Ben. I spent most of my early years from when I was a baby with my grandmother, Lily, at Gudnampanha, while the rest of the family travelled around, working on nearby cattle and sheep stations. But sometimes when Mum and Dad picked me up and I went back to the family for a while, it was always Sheila who looked after me. Of course, I always ended up back with my grandmother at Gudnampanha. Even after Olive and Leonard were born, I still lived with my grandmother until I was about six.

Sheila and I used to go hunting a lot with our grandmothers and aunts for things like lizards and rabbits, which we used to dig out of their burrows. Sometimes we even used to catch bigger game like kangaroos and emus because we also used to take along our dogs and they were very good at catching game, especially kangaroos. Sheila taught me how to dig for yalka, a small wild onion which was very tasty, and to look for Tyapa, a witchetty grub that lived in gum trees, and how to get them out of their holes in the wood. They were also very tasty. She also taught me how to collect and gather miltyiparu, a small berry that looked something like a blackcurrant, which grew on many different kinds of trees and was very sweet and juicy and good to eat. When they were ripe, they were red and orange in colour, while another variety was a black colour. We also enjoyed sweets or lollies, if you like, from the bush in the form of gum that grew on a tree that we used to call a Ngudlhu tree, an acacia that I think is a relative of the gidgee tree.

We used to call the gum Ngudlhu too. We used to also get ngudlhu from the ordinary acacia tree, Kalku, but that was not as good as the ones from the ngudlhu tree.

My father had a plant of about twenty horses and he also had an old horse-drawn buggy. When he used to go looking for work on the stations, that is how he used to travel. I used to love riding in that old buggy! I remember one time going with the family on one such trip to Roxby Downs Station, but I was so young and little that I can barely remember. Anyway, there was another family there also, but I can't remember their name, and they had come to Roxby looking for work and they travelled around by horse and buggy too. They were European, you know, white people. It was the time of the Great 1930's Depression and lots of people had no money and many families travelled around and were glad of any work that they could get. They were nice people and had kids also, so we were glad to have playmates about the same age as us. We were all camped on the edge of a big dry claypan about a half a kilometre east of the Roxby Downs homestead. We kids used to play a lot on that claypan. Also, in those days, Afghan hawkers used to travel around in camel drawn wagons from station to station selling all kinds of stuff like clothes, pots and pans, boots and shoes and almost anything. Some years back, one of those old Afghan hawker's wagon had broken down right near the claypan and parts of the wagon were still scattered about. Vera, Bert and Sheila, together with some kids from the other family who were of the same age, were playing around the old wreck one day. They had made up a game where they pretended to be an old Afghan hawker travelling around the stations selling things driving the wagon and camels. The older kids like Vera and Bert made Sheila and a kid from the white family pretend that they were the camels and they were driving them around from place to place. They had got parts of the old wagon and put them around the necks of the 'camels'. Around Sheila's neck, they put the round ring from the end of the hub of the wagon wheel and it must have fitted neatly over her head and there she was happily pretending to be a camel. Everybody was having a fun time, that is until the adults called the kids home for supper and that is when the fun really started. When the kids tried to take the ring off of Sheila's neck, it just would not come off and after a while, the kids started to panic and ran off to tell the adults with Sheila trailing along behind, crying. When the adults tried, they could not get the ring off either. They tried soaping up Sheila's head and also the ring without any luck and even dried off her hair and then greased her head and neck and also the ring with lots of axle grease but that didn't work at all. Everyone was starting to panic now and poor Sheila was bawling her eyes out and so were the rest of us kids. That is, all except the

elder kids who I think were feeling a little bit guilty. Then my father said that the only thing left to do was to take Sheila up to the smithy where they put shoes on the horses and there was a big fire which was made worse by the bellows that blew on the coals and made them red hot. Well, that really upset the apple cart! We little kids started screaming and crying all at the same time because we were thinking that they were going to throw Sheila onto the fire! But what my father and the others did was put some blankets on the bench where the big vice was so that they could lie Sheila down. Then they put the ring into the vice to make it nice and solid so that they could cut it away with a big hacksaw. It was hard work, but they got it off in the end. Poor Sheila was having a hard time of it and was completely exhausted. Vera and Bert got the biggest hiding and one that they remembered for a long time. Like I said earlier, I really don't know how old I was at the time; about four, I think.



Sheila was a good playmate and as children we did a lot of things together. But just because we were close didn't mean that we did not fight at all. We had a lot of fights over sister and brother stuff. I remember that one time I myself got the biggest hiding over one of our fights. I don't remember what we were fighting over now, probably nothing. Anyway, I had Sheila on the ground and was sitting on her chest and punching her for all that I was worth, and Sheila was screaming for our father to come and help. Our father came and picked me off of Sheila's chest and because I was squirming and kicking, he held me in a bear hug. I was still mad and angry, so I turned around and bit him on the chest. Well, big mistake and a very bad move. He dropped me down and caught hold of my ear and led me up to the wall of the house. My father used to shave with a cut throat razor which he used to sharpen on a thick piece of patent leather called a strop and this is where he hung the strop when he was not using it and, boy, didn't he give me the biggest hiding! I was sore for a couple of days after and I told Sheila that I was going to hate her for the rest of my life! Of course, an hour or two later, Sheila came over and gave me a big hug and a love up and everything was alright again. I think that I was about seven or eight at the time.



As I have previously said, I spent most of my early childhood days with my grandmother at Gudnampanha up near Curdimurka, so I don't recall when I first met Percy Dodd, my brother-in-law. I think that he spent most of his earlier days at Finnis Springs and Anna Creek stations. As a young

man, he worked around Witchelina, Mulgaria and Callanna stations and also Muloorina where it is said that he was romantically linked with one of the station owner's (old Elliot Price) daughters. He was always smartly dressed and used to ride around on a new Malvern push bike whenever he was home at Finniss Springs, and he was a bit of a ladies' man. Of course, he had hair then and was known as Percy. It was not until his late twenties or early thirties when he started losing his hair that he became known as Knobby... a name that stuck with him for the rest of his life.

I can't recall when he and Sheila got married but they made a wonderful couple. In those days, everybody went to Marree to get married but I cannot remember where Sheila and Percy got married. It could've been at Finniss Springs because I think the Mission was going by then. Anyway, they were very much in love and Percy fitted in well with the family. By then, too, Vera had married Ted Larkins and had moved out to where Ted worked with the Commonwealth Railways on the Trans-Australian Railway line and Bert had gone out to work on stations in the Flinders Ranges. At this stage, my father was working as the station cook at Finniss Springs and Percy himself was working there as a station hand. Percy used to do a lot around our home, and I remember that at one time he built a two hundred gallon, in-ground water tank near our house. In those days, everybody used to have to walk about two kilometres and carry back, by hand, water in two- or three-gallon buckets from two large in-ground water reservoirs for their daily use. So, Percy had this great idea of building this tank to save all that time and trouble going for all those long trips to get water. I don't know where he got all the cement from but when the tank was complete, he borrowed a hundred-gallon portable water tank and cart from the station and filled it up from the dam. It worked well, too, and saved us a lot trouble. The problem, though, was that it worked too well because when the relatives saw what was happening, they all came over and got water from Percy's tank instead of going all the way to the dam and so Percy was constantly refilling the tank.



When I myself grew older, I never worked on any station with Percy except for Billa Kalina, where we worked together for a couple of weeks, but at that time I was still going to school and had taken a couple of weeks off to help my father take a mob of store cattle from Coward Springs to Billa Kalina station for Colin Greenfield the station owner.



Percy gave me my first pair of R. M. Williams riding boots and I think that I was about twelve at the time. I was very proud of them because it was the first pair of boots that I ever owned because I used to walk around in bare feet before that. Well, all of us kids did. I remember that I kept falling over because of the high heels but I got used to them in the end. Percy also taught me how to shoot and I became a fairly crack shot with a .22 calibre rifle, but my best rifle was the old army .303 rifle. I could hit a target of well over two hundred yards with it and be spot on every time. You had to be careful with a .303 rifle, though, and keep it clean and well-oiled or it would kick (recoil) and give you a nasty bruised shoulder.



Percy was a good shot with almost any rifle and could shoot with just about a 100% accuracy. My brother Bert and Norman Woods worked for a time with Tex Morton, touring around with his travelling show. When they left, he gave them one of the pistols that he used in his act in the show. They gave that revolver to Percy when they came back to Finniss Springs. Gee, he was a good shot with that. He could hit a target six times out of six! Fair Dinkum! I don't know what happened to that gun in the end.

Percy and I used to join my father on his dingo hunting trips. One time, we had pulled up for dinner at Mt Gason, a bore on the Birdsville Track, with a plant of horses. Percy saw a dingo about two hundred yards away, chewing on some old bullock carcasses, so he decided to get its scalp. He grabbed his .22 rifle and started stalking it. He was creeping and crawling from cover to cover trying to get close for a good shot and he was just about closer enough for just that when we started screaming and shouting at him. Percy looked back at us, puzzled and annoyed because our shouting had frightened away his dingo but when he turned around and looked behind him, he saw that another dingo was creeping up on him. Percy got a fright and quickly turned around and shot it instead. I really didn't think that it was going to attack him because I think that it was just curious as to what this strange creature was that was creeping up to another dingo and an old bullock carcass.



Well, I guess that I could go on and on and tell you a lot about the family and about the things that we used to do in the old days, travelling around on the buggy and later on in the bun cart, which was made from the frame of the body of a small truck and modified and transformed into a

horse-drawn vehicle. My father once bought an old 1926 Chev buckboard and Percy taught Ben and me how to drive it. Gee, we had a lot of fun with that, going everywhere and treating it as though it was a four-wheel drive! The Bone Shaker, we used to call it.

I bought myself a short base Land Rover when I joined the Commonwealth Railways and Percy used to borrow it sometimes to take his family out bush on holidays. I was stationed at Curdimurka as a fettler in the early part of my railway career in the rail gang there. Our gang was travelling one afternoon on the rail line in our section car just south of Coward Springs when we saw clouds of dust and great activity out on the flats near the Bubbler Mound Springs. This Land Rover seem to be going around and around and also going flat out over small bushes and gullies. It aroused our curiosity and we were wondering what in the world could be going on. The mystery was solved when we got closer. Yeah, it was my brother-in-law, with all his family on board, all hanging on for dear life, in my Land Rover, chasing a dingo! He got it too.

Just because Percy and I got on so well together didn't mean that we didn't have our fights and quarrels. In the times where we worked together on the stations, Percy always acted the big brother-in-law and tried to look after me, which I suppose was a good thing but as a young fellow, I resented it. Percy was always calm and good natured, but I used to get angry with him over many things. Take for instance the time that we were up in Queensland on a droving trip. We were camped beside this big waterhole and I went for a walk. I saw this dingo and seeing that I had also taken my gun along with me, I decided to add his scalp to my collection. I was just taking aim and was about to pull the trigger, when to my amazement, the dingo toppled over... dead! Then I heard the report of a rifle. Yeah, Percy had shot it from the other side of the waterhole. I told you that he was a crack shot but he spoiled my bit of fun and that made me angry. He was always my best mate, though.

Kati Thanda

Lake Eyre



Lake Eyre is known to the Arabana, and all Aboriginal tribes of the Lake Eyre basin, as Kati Thanda. There is another name by which it is known to the Arabana and although I have heard it spoken, I have now forgotten it and cannot for the life of me recall it, which may be a good thing as it is a secret name and as such, should not be freely spoken. Lake Eyre is culturally significant to the Arabana and the Lake itself is both revered and feared. Legends and stories abound from the beginning of time and of which the Europeans love to call the Dreamtime. Out of these legends or Ularaka came many of the laws and beliefs that formed the very fabric of Arabana society and the way of life that formed the code that they lived by daily.

Arabana considered Kati Thanda as a very special place that provided them with a great sense of spirituality and provided them with an abundant food source. Waterfowl of many species came from far and wide to nest and raise their young, while many varieties of birds and animals thrived along the shoreline. I remember, as a small child, standing beside the shores of the North Lake and marvelling at the big waves that came crashing on to the shore and wondering what it was that moved the waters so. At that point in time, I did not have any inkling or any idea of the sea and the vast waters that make up the world's oceans nor of the action of the tides that controlled them or the effect of wind on the surface of water. In my Aboriginality, I attributed the coming and going of the waters to the whims and controls of the spirits that I knew lived in the Lake.

The Arabana believed that the Lake and the surrounding countryside was inhabited by an invisible race of people called the Warrina, chief of which was an old man by the name of Winti-pilpa. Winti-pilpanha lived with his wives on an island in the North Lake named by Europeans as Brookes Island. I do not know the Arabana name for it, and if I have ever heard it spoken, I have long forgotten it. In any case, it is a name that should not be mentioned often. Winti-pilpanha was a fierce old man who did not like intruders or interlopers who trespassed on his lands and was prone to deal harshly with anyone who did so. He travelled all around both North and South Lakes and camped at many sites. It was said that his presence and the

locality of his current camp site could be determined by the presence of white animals in the area, for example, a white dingo or a white kangaroo would indicate that the old man was camped nearby. Arabana people, on seeing such an animal, would pull up camp and move as far away as possible. All the animals around belonged to him and woe betide any man who killed a white animal or bird in or around the Lake.

When he personally travelled, Winti-pilpa rode and travelled in the whirlwind and all that you could see of him were his bushy eyebrows, and that is where part of his name comes from. 'Pilpa' in the Arabana language means 'eyebrows'. Arabana had a custom upon seeing a whirlwind, especially one that may be heading in your direction, of picking up a handful of dirt and throwing it at the approaching whirlwind. This action was supposed to avert it and turn it aside and stop Winti-pilpa coming through and picking you up. Away from the Lake, Arabana also believed that evil spirits and bad omens rode the whirlwinds. I guess it was a bit like the European custom of making the sign of the cross when one is confronted with evil.

In drought times, and used in periods when the Lake was dry, an ancient trade route bisected the South Lake. This was used by people from as far away as the Macdonnell Ranges in the Northern Territory and people from the deserts west of Ayres Rock and of course by people in between, including the Arabana. Using this route, Aboriginal people travelled as far south as the Flinders Ranges to places like present day Parachilna and beyond, taking goods such as native tobacco amongst other things to exchange and barter for ochre, for example, and other commodities. The route across the Lake started at a place that is called Emerald Springs by Europeans today; the Arabana name escapes me. These springs were the site of a kind of trading post where many Aboriginal people from various tribes were allowed by the Arabana to live temporarily. Northern people, western people, people coming up from the south and people from the eastern side of the Lake all met here to trade goods and commodities on a regular basis. The route through the Lake emerged at another set of springs which today has the European name of Lachlan Springs. The Arabana name is Warralanha. It is a significant site for the Arabana, and they used to live about there in great numbers. It was considered a Wilyaru site and many initiation ceremonies took place here which made it more or less a 'men's only' site. This place belonged also to Winti-pilpa and his people and was one of his many camps around the Lake. Many Ularaka from around Arabana Country came and ended here, too. Notably, the Ularaka of the Turkey grandfather and his grandson.

Out in about the middle of the Lake, this old trade route passed

another set of springs where people often used to stop and rest and slake their thirst. Even though there is salt all around, the water is quite pleasant and drinkable. These springs are known to the Arabana as Putumanha and Europeans have named them Blindman Springs. From these springs looking into the far distance towards the north and in the Lake itself, two small islands can be seen. These islands are known to the Arabana as Kura-Kurapulanha or 'The Grey Ones'.

Many Arabana people derive their names from Winti-pilpa, the Warrina and from the many legends and Ularaka that surround them. Some Arabana babies are born with blonde hair that turn brown as they grow older. These children are said to be the children of the Warrina. I, myself, had snow white hair as a baby. An aunt of mine cut a lock of my hair and kept it until I was a teenager. When she showed it to me, I could not believe that it came from my head. I don't know what happened to those locks as my aunt has long since passed away.

Arabana people, as I have said, held Winti-pilpa in great awe and respect. There were many stories about him, of his great strength, prowess and magical powers. There were stories also of ordinary men, great though they must have been and brave, who had pitched battles with him. Sadly, these epic battles of heroism and valour have now been lost in the misty, shadowy past of long ago and I cannot remember any of it.

Let me tell you here a little personal story that may help you understand the awe in which we Arabana held old Winti-pilpa. On one of my father's month-long dingo hunting trips around the Lake during winter, my brother-in-law Percy and I were with him. Dingo scalps in those days were worth a lot of money as the Government tried to keep dingo numbers down. We had made camp not far from the shores of the North Lake and Percy and I had spent the day scouting the surrounding sand hills for dingoes and dingo pups in particular with little success and were on our way back to camp. My father had gone out hunting in a different direction. There was an hour or so to go before sundown when we came across signs that there may be a nest of pups nearby. We of course used our tracking skills and soon found them, but they ran into their burrow before we could catch them. For just such a specific occasion, we carried a small shovel on the pommel of my saddle, so we started to dig them out. It took us the best part of the hour before we pulled the first pup out and the sun was nearly at the point of setting. As always, of course, Percy had made me do all the digging and shovelling while he sat on the bank and watched and waited and it was he who was going to kill the pups.

When I pulled the first pup out of the burrow, I called excitedly to him, “Hey, Percy! It’s a white one!”

Percy took one look at the pup and without saying a word, sprang up, swung onto his horse and took off for camp at a gallop. Belatedly, I realised the implications that cute little white dingo puppy brought and what I had done. Nervously looking around, I quickly picked up my shovel and got on my horse and got out of there in a hurry!

My thoughts constantly return to Gudnampanha on the banks of the North Creek, to where my grandmother, Lily, brought me as a small baby. It is just west of South Lake Eyre. Many Ularaka, legends and stories emanate from around there. One of these is the Ularaka of the mighty Kardimarrkara, the Arabana Rainbow Serpent. It is said to have lived in that part of the Lake at about where the North Creek that flows past Gudnampanha empties into the Lake. It was reputedly a very fierce creature and one best left alone. It lived there for countless numbers of years before one day going up into the sky, where it remains to this day. If you look up into the sky on a cloudless night, you will see it. It stretches across the sky now as the Milky Way (Warru Pari).

Arabana believed that Kati Thanda was created by an ancestor from a neighbouring tribe spreading out the skin of a giant kangaroo. It is a long and complex story and is sensitive and sacred to the Arabana, as the story is used in the initiation ceremonies of young men. Therefore, the songs and stories pertaining to it are secret and sacred. Here then, is a condensed and very brief version.

Wilkurdu was the name of the ancestor and in the Thirrari (Dhirari) language Wilkurdu means ‘old woman’. The Thirrari was a small tribe of people who lived just south of the present-day Marree township. Wilkurdu was said to have been born of an old woman and reputedly grew up to be a fully grown and initiated man overnight. Another story has him springing fully grown and initiated from the body of the old woman. He is out hunting one day when he comes across a large kangaroo which takes off in fright and Wilkurdu decides to give chase. The chase begins from around about the Wirringina Springs area near Mundowdna Station, south east of Marree, and as the kangaroo flees along where the Frome Creek is now, it goes past the Wells Creek area heading towards where Muloorina Station is today. After creating many of the prominent and natural features in the landscape in the region, the chase turns around and comes back past the black hills (Papapapanha) just north of Marree, where it is said to have stopped for a short time before heading north towards Hermit Hill (Ngarlamina) near

present day Alberrie Creek. From here it hops towards Lake Bowman, just west of where Lake Eyre now is, and its tail is still there today, represented by a long, high sand hill. The kangaroo continues on at a great pace and this time heads for Primrose Springs, where it stops and looks back at the hunter. It is still standing there today as Lagoon Hill. In its flight, the kangaroo reaches the Peake Creek and tries to escape along this large creek but old Wilkurdu, throwing his waddy from a long, long way back, breaks the kangaroo's leg and catches up with it and kills it. At the Keckwick Springs, he builds a fire and puts the kangaroo in it to cook and then goes away to get a drink of water, amongst other things.

However, when he returns, he finds that the kangaroo has come back to life and has hopped out of the fire and with its leg magically healed, escapes to the north. Old Wilkurdu can do nothing but take up the chase once more but by now the kangaroo is a long way ahead of him. He chases it to Toondina Springs (Thuntinha) which is a significant site in this story where he has an altercation with an aunt. Wilkurdu hits her so hard with his boomerang that it cuts off her head and it flies in the air and ends up just north of present-day Oodnadatta township. When he finally catches up with the kangaroo, he finds that it has been killed by an old man and his dogs at a rock hole called Yulpulanha. Wilkurdu asks the old man for the skin and after helping him skin the kangaroo, he begins the long journey home carrying the skin over his shoulder. The skin has many folds and at various places along the way he puts it down to spread it out but each time the locals take exception, crying out, "Take it away with you. We don't want it here as it will take up too much room and we want this space for our children." Strangely, the skin grows larger every time that he puts it down and attempts to spread it out and at the various sites that he tries to do this, there are today wide, flat saline areas that represent the contact of the skin to the earth. Eventually he does put it down and spreads it out not far from where the mouth of the Neales River is now and it formed into what today is Lake Eyre and known to Arabana as Kati Thanda. There were still wrinkles and folds in the giant kangaroo skin and that today makes up the many inlets and bays and the uneven shoreline of Lake Eyre.

