

Stores & Stories

Northern Territory Aboriginal Communities

Jean Bagshaw

**Historical Society of the Northern Territory
in association with the
North Australia Research Unit**

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— DEDICATION —

I dedicate this book to my Aboriginal friends.

Sadly, there have been a number of deaths in their ranks, but I feel this story would not be complete without mentioning their names and acknowledging their contribution to Aboriginal development, the preservation of their traditions and the fight for Aboriginal rights.

In respect of Aboriginal customs, I wish to advise Aborigines in the Maningrida, Katherine, Yuendumu and Willowra areas that the names of some of their deceased relatives may be mentioned within.

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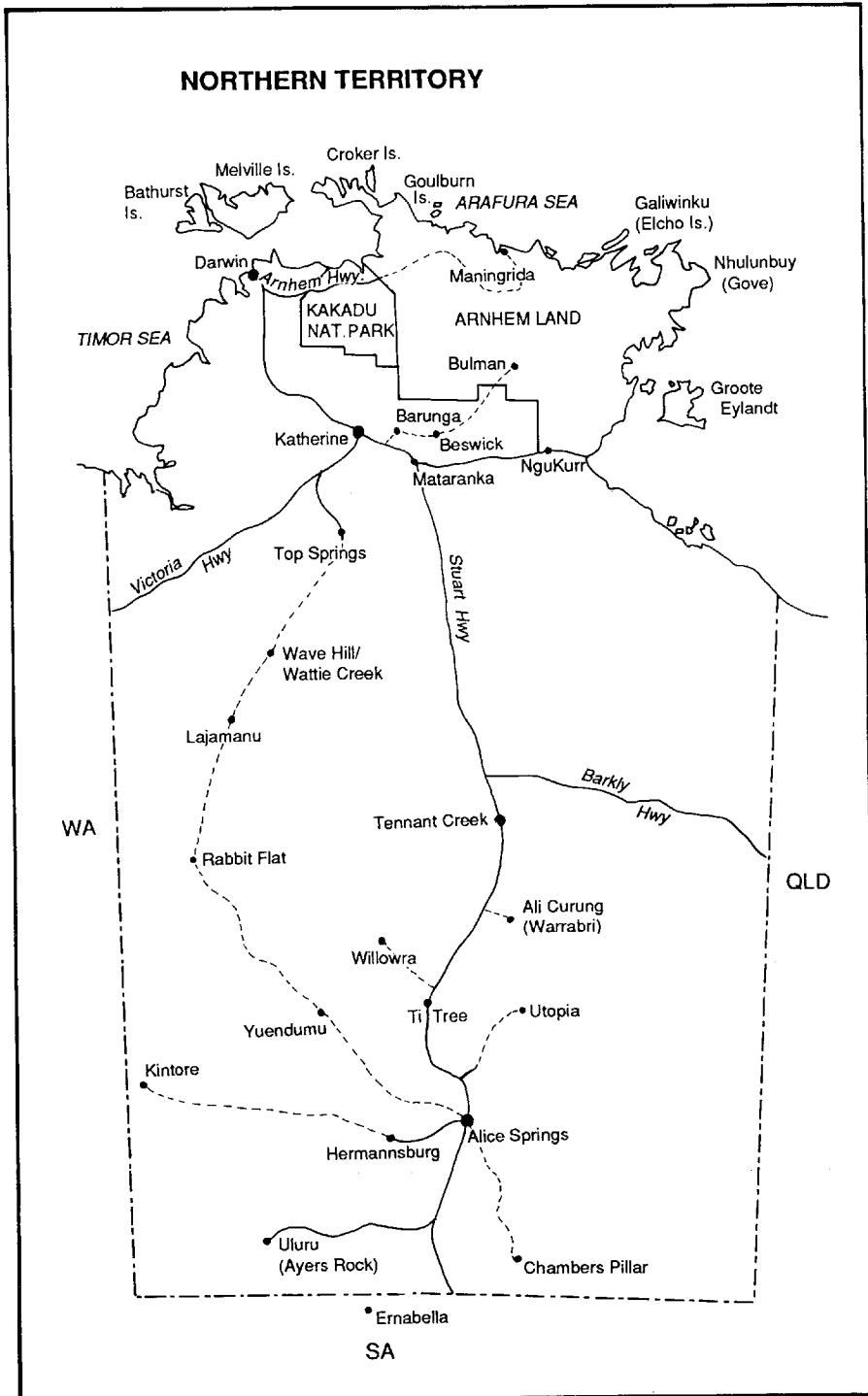
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Last, but by no means least, my grateful thanks are extended to the many Aboriginal people who not only made this story possible, but also so patiently and graciously answered my innumerable questions.

Jean Bagshaw

NORTHERN TERRITORY



INTRODUCTION

In October 1969, my husband was appointed Business Manager of the Maningrida Co-operative Society, an Aboriginal organisation on the central north coast of Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia. In this role he was the first European person, other than public servants or missionaries, ever to be officially employed in Arnhem Land, and I was employed as his assistant. The necessity for the appointment of a Business Manager at Maningrida was in direct response to the changing needs and aspirations of Aboriginal people in the community, brought about through the introduction by the Commonwealth Government of a Training Allowance for Aborigines. Because our involvement was in the field of economic development, we as a family — my husband Glen, my sons Geoff and Mark, and I — were then able to embark on an exciting journey of learning, discovery and experiences with some of the indigenous people of this very ancient land and culture. Later, the introduction of Aboriginal Land Rights, which encouraged Self-Determination, and the formation of Aboriginal Community Councils and the Out-station Movement, all acted as catalysts for further considerable changes. In all, this journey has embraced a period of more than twenty years and has taken us to live and work in many remote Aboriginal communities and towns throughout the length and breadth of the Northern Territory.

During our period of employment in Arnhem Land, at the request of Aboriginal people in the community, the development of new Aboriginal projects, including a new store, and the training of Aboriginal staff were undertaken. Later, in other areas of the Northern Territory, our job included the setting up and making operational other new Aboriginal community stores and the establishment of an Aboriginal-owned and -run warehouse, as well as, on a number of occasions, having to rectify the results of gross errors of judgement, lack of business principles, and dishonesty, which caused many Aboriginal-owned community stores to falter. It was our task to re-establish those businesses by working long hours to accumulate sufficient profits to clear the stores' debts, thus putting them back on a sound footing to hand over to new, responsible management. For this reason, much I have written deals with the failures, rather than highlighting the successes achieved by some of the people who had more expertise and greater integrity and who had the interests of Aborigines at heart. I have nothing but the greatest respect and admiration for these people. Their good works have generally gone unnoticed and their only reward has been the knowledge of a job well done.

The word 'girls' has been used on occasions when referring to female staff members. This term was, and still is, being used by the staff members themselves and in no way is it meant to be derogatory; in fact, to me it expresses more of the warmth and camaraderie which existed between us and our female Aboriginal staff.

I have used the word 'humpy' to describe some of the sub-standard dwellings which, even in 1993, a number of Aboriginal people still have no other choice but to live in. Bush shelters more adequately describe the primitive bough constructions often erected to provide shade and shelter on occasions of ceremony, hunting and family gatherings.

PART 1

ARNHEM LAND

CHAPTER 1

ARRIVAL IN DARWIN

It was a night of searing heat when our plane touched down at Darwin Airport, concluding our flight from Adelaide. As we stepped from the mobile stairway onto the hot, steamy tarmac, a blast of scorching, polluted air, with the acrid smell of av-gas and oil, greeted us like a knockout blow from a boxer's glove, leaving no doubt in our minds that we had arrived in the tropics on the first leg of our journey to Maningrida.

In October 1969, the small, commercial airport terminal attached to the RAAF Base was little more than a tin shed and had cheap-looking, uncomfortable, metal-framed chairs with green and white plastic strips stretched across to form the seats. On that humid October night, we collected our luggage, hailed a taxi and sped off to the city, approximately 8 kilometres away, as we had an over-night booking at the Don Motel, later Darwin's first casino. That same night, the Wet Season broke with a vengeance. The rain came down in torrents and the thunder and lightning were the worst I had ever experienced. Also, as excitement was riding high, sleep was well nigh impossible. I had read that Darwin was listed as one of the world's most lightning-prone cities, and it did not take long for me to be convinced that what I had read was indeed correct.

We were scheduled to leave by air for Maningrida at 7.30 am the following day, so in the light of dawn, whilst making our way back to the airport, we were able to catch glimpses of the elevated tropical homes, the beauty and symmetry of the Travellers' Palms, and in fact many varieties of palms, so synonymous with the tropics. We also saw fragrant frangipani, hibiscus, bougainvillaea and brilliantly coloured crotons.

A five-passenger Beechcraft Bonanza was Connellan Airways' choice of plane to take my husband, our younger son and me to Maningrida. Our elder son had stayed temporarily in Adelaide for schooling. The other two passengers were a European mother of ten, who had been in Darwin for a short break, and a young Aboriginal man with terminal leprosy. He, unfortunately, was very air-sick but nevertheless very pleased to be going home to his family. Sadly, he died a few days later.

How excited, yet at the same time apprehensive, I felt as the pilot flew the plane at a reasonably low altitude, eastwards along Australia's northern coastline. After crossing the Cobourg Peninsula, the magnificent scenic panorama unfolded like a giant canvas, and at times small areas appeared as tiny cameos of intricate tapestries in soft, delicate and beautiful shades of cream, brown, tan, blue, turquoise, green, and terracotta, as well as black. I was truly enraptured by this natural beauty, and am sure the same scenes would probably be an inspiration to most — especially to artists and textile designers. I also glimpsed the tidal tropical rivers snaking their way through dense vegetation past the mangrove swamps to their final destination, the shimmering blue waters of the Arafura Sea. In all, the plane flew over the Adelaide, Mary, Wildman, West, South and East Alligator, Cooper, King, Goomadeer, Mann and Liverpool Rivers. The grandeur of Arnhem Land and the escarpment, part of which is now included in the Kakadu National Park, but then undisturbed by tourism and mining, was for me an unforgettable sight.

In nature, there is so much beauty, if only we can take the time or, indeed, I suppose, are lucky enough to have the opportunity to travel and see this wonderful country, Australia. The pilot, knowing it was our first trip to the area, went out of his way to point out many landmarks and interesting features. On the approach to Maningrida, 380 kilometres east of Darwin, instead of landing, he circled Entrance Island, 3.5 kilometres off shore, as well as Haul Round, a sandy atoll approximately 13 kilometres off the coast. The Aboriginal settlement certainly looked very small, isolated and lonely with seemingly little habitation anywhere along the way from Darwin.

Arnhem Land is an area of 95,875 square kilometres in the Top End of the Northern Territory. It was declared a Reserve under the *Crown Lands Ordinance* in 1931, for the exclusive use of Aboriginal people under the auspices of the Federal Government. It was subsequently scheduled as Aboriginal land with the Enactment of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*, after which the process of Self-Determination was encouraged, allowing Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders the right to determine their own future, within the general framework of Australian society; it does not mean, as in an international context, the right to establish a separate form of government. The names of areas of Aboriginal lands were then changed from Aboriginal Reserves to Aboriginal Land Trusts.

CHAPTER 2

MANINGRIDA

On arrival at Maningrida, we were met and welcomed by John Wilders, the Assistant Superintendent, Peter Williams, the School Principal, and an Aboriginal student who had been especially chosen to meet Mark.

The majority of local inhabitants of Arnhem Land are full-blood Aborigines. Actually, we had previously not had much contact with Aborigines, except for seeing a few, mainly part-Aboriginal people, in the city of Adelaide, South Australia. Later, this student's family was to play host to Geoff, our elder son, who, as an anthropologist, lived at Jimarda out-station for 13 months as the only European in the area, while undertaking field work.

Maningrida, a Government Settlement, was set up in May 1957, as a convenient meeting place and trading post for eight different Aboriginal groups, the Gunavidjis being the local indigenous landowners. At that time, there were approximately 800 Aborigines who had been brought together from an area of about 130 square kilometres and were being supplied with very basic foodstuffs, medical care and supplies, education and social welfare. Because different Aboriginal groups were obliged to live side by side, much intergroup friction arose. It was later my pleasure to meet Mr Drysdale, who was the first Superintendent, and Mrs Drysdale, the first white woman to have ever lived at Maningrida. The book, *The End of Dreaming*, gives insight into the rigours of her being a pioneer woman in such an isolated place.

The settlement, situated in savannah woodland country with patches of tropical rain forest, was on the eastern bank of the estuary of the Liverpool River. The availability of fresh water from springs and wells probably influenced the choice of site, but, at the same time, it proved to be less than convenient as the Liverpool River is approximately 3.5 kilometres wide at this point, and only in the Dry Season, May-September, is Darwin accessible by road. Even then, one had to negotiate a 76 kilometre drive over a shocking road, following and eventually crossing both the Liverpool and Mann Rivers, which added to the nightmare proportions of the drive, to say nothing of most of the rest of the journey to Darwin.

Soon after our arrival, we were taken on a tour of the settlement and eventually enjoyed morning tea at the United, later Uniting, Church manse, home of the Reverend Gowan and Mrs Shirley Armstrong. There we met Aboriginal and European members of the Board of the Maningrida Co-operative Society, our employers. Initially, Glen was to manage the store, and later was to initiate and implement new projects for the about-to-be-formed Maningrida Progress Association.

Information about the shop in which we were to work and the house in which we were to live was not readily forthcoming, but we were not too worried as it was a glorious day with a cloudless blue sky. The red poincianas and brilliant yellow cascading cassias were in full bloom, as were the pink and white frangipani, and long branches of orange and magenta Bougainvillea gently swayed in the light breeze making a spectacular sight. There were some Aboriginal people resting in the shade of the coconut palms on the foreshore and, beyond, the white sandy beach was being gently lapped by the azure waters of the Liverpool River. Nearby, children were happily swimming and playing in a lily-covered spring, which had been one of Maningrida's first water supplies. With this idyllic tropical setting, some of my apprehensions were dispelled.

Soon enough we were to learn that our house was the original one built at the settlement, constructed of aluminium-type material and elevated on concrete pylons about one metre high. It had a worn-out wood stove, but the house, fortunately, had been cleaned throughout by the Aboriginal girls from Home Management. It also came complete with a gardener, which we felt was unnecessary. He, unfortunately, had been given the demeaning European name of Donkey. We said we did not require a gardener as it was only a small garden which could be easily managed, but, on finding that otherwise he would be unemployed, our minds were changed. I later employed a young woman to do some housework, not realising it entailed most of her family, old and young, arriving too. This became more trouble than it was worth, so I resumed doing my own household chores.

Because nobody had given thought to the fact that we would need supplies, our larder contained only a dish of beet sugar, a few stale crusts of bread and a few bananas left by the previous tenants. There was a bowl of pink frangipani for decoration. But, as the house was situated practically at the water's edge, I was really delighted; that was until, in the late afternoon, the storm clouds began to gather and then, in the evening, as though all hell had been let loose, 'The Wet' broke at Maningrida. Never in my life have I been so terrified. I was sure our first night there was also to be our last as the most vivid sheet lightning lit up and fork lightning with all its tropical fury dazzlingly zig-zagged across the sky and could at times be heard to sizzle as it hit the ground nearby. The house shook and rattled, and thunder rolled and roared beneath, some of the light

bulbs blew, after which we were blacked out for hours, the heavens opened up and the rains bucketed down. After twenty years of weathering tropical storms, I confess that I am still scared, although other people say they thoroughly enjoy the experience of standing out of doors watching these magnificent electrical spectacles. Later, we were to find the power supply was less than predictable, often going out at vital times such as when one was cooking a meal. Once when Glen was driving in the bush, lightning struck a tree beside his vehicle, splitting the tree in pieces. Jimmy, his Aboriginal passenger, leapt onto Glen's knee with fright; so I am not alone in being frightened by the vagaries of tropical storms. On another occasion, whilst staying at the Hotel Darwin, I was gazing out of the window when a violent storm erupted. The electricity pole about two metres away was hit and the light and fittings were shattered — so were my nerves! Perhaps my three and a half years as a Radar Operator in the WAAAF, where I learnt about the dangers and forces of electricity, have made me treat this source of energy with nothing but the very greatest of respect.

The sunsets at Maningrida were magnificent, at times casting a golden, orange, red, pinkish, blue or purple glow across the western sky; these beautiful colours being reflected in the calm waters beneath. Often, whilst preparing the evening meal, I would be drawn as by a magnet to the beach to relax under the gently swaying palm fronds, absolutely awed and entranced by these glorious spectacles. An added joy was to see a dug-out canoe, with sail aloft and carrying local fishermen, gliding across the horizon on its way to shore. As soon as the after-glow of the sun faded, night would pull down its shutters very quickly.

The geckos loved the tropical evenings and, with great agility, climbed doors, window frames and screens, fortunately devouring some of the less desirable insects. Wire screens would have to be one of the greatest of human inventions, especially in the tropics, where mosquitoes and sand flies are legion. They, too, loved the going down of the sun and my particular, rare Ax group blood. A can of insect repellent was essential.

There were Christmas beetles, scorpions, leeches, some small green bugs with vicious bites, and around the time of the Wet Season, the lavender bugs would arrive in their millions; they would fall into food whilst one was trying to eat a meal, get stuck in one's hair and just generally make a thorough nuisance of themselves. There was also an awful smell if they were trodden under foot. Green-bellied ants inflicted particularly painful bites and were to be avoided at all costs. Myriads of cockroaches would begin their nocturnal assault around 9.00 to 10.00 o'clock, invading homes and buildings, crawling into cupboards and drawers, over cutlery, crockery and clothing, up drains to the bath, sinks, shower and toilet, making a great deal of extra work as everything had to be rewashed before use. The cockroaches were brownish-black and 4-5 centimetres long and could fly as well as crawl. They seemed to be no respecters of houses as

they would invade the cleanest as well as the dirtiest. One would think that the only sure way of total destruction would be by stamping on them, but even then, you could not always be sure of success as they would scuttle away seemingly unscathed. Even in a refrigerator you would think they would die of the cold, but no, they just seemed to hibernate and scampered off when disturbed. No wonder they are listed as one of the world's oldest surviving species of insects; their powers of survival are truly amazing.

The shrill chorus of cicadas seemed to continually pervade the late afternoon and evening air, and, with the on-coming Wet Season, there was an almost deafening cacophony as the noisy choirs of frogs would perform, making sleep quite difficult at times. Even before the first drop of rain, their croaking commenced and, with the increase of the rain, so they stepped up their volume and tempo. Occasionally, one would appear in the toilet. The noisy crickets also added to this Wet Season stridulation. The fireflies and glow-worms sometimes appeared and then, at night, it would be fascinating to watch the fire-flies flitting across the room. Disappointingly, they are very ordinary, brownish flies in the daytime. Each season, with the return of the rainbow birds and the blue kingfishers, I was filled with joy — the red and iridescent blue/green dragon-flies also abounded.

CHAPTER 3

MANINGRIDA CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETY

Later on our first day at Maningrida, we were taken to see the shop, which turned out to be an old, dilapidated, galvanised iron shed, which some time in the distant past had been painted white. It had a rough, red earth floor and a kiosk-type opening and counter, with the customers having to stand on a wooden duckboard to be served. The Maningrida Co-operative Society, which operated and owned the shop, was also \$13,000 in debt and about to be deregistered by the Registrar of Companies. I am sure the members of the Board feared that, had we been shown the shop earlier, before the plane was to leave on its return flight to Darwin, we might well and truly have been back on board.

Inside, the shop was dark, dingy and alive with cockroaches. The following day was the community pay day, and hardly a price to be seen on any of the goods, but Tommy and Joe, two very pleasant young Aboriginal men, were there to assist us. When the shop opened for business and I glimpsed the sea of black faces, there was a moment of panic as I wondered if I would ever know what people were asking for, or if indeed I would ever recognise one person from another. I must confess that at no time was I fluent in any of the many different tribal languages, but got by and did learn to recognise most people and from which language group they came.

Some of the requests on the first day were, to say the least, baffling: bogey soap was bath soap, rain soap was Rinso, tilip was tea, and a clock was a torch globe. A customer came in and explained that a couple of weeks earlier he had bought a new watch. It would not work, so the previous manager, the wife of one of the public servants, had sent it to a jeweller in Darwin for a check-up. I searched to see if it had been returned, but all I could find was a brand-new watch. As the customer had a job and needed to get to work on time, he decided to purchase that watch, so I said we would come to terms when the other one returned. Much to my embarrassment, I found he had re-purchased his own watch. After a bit of a laugh, he duly received his refund! There was good news too; Bob Cross, formerly of the United Church Mission staff, and his small team of Aboriginal workers had commenced building a new store. This project

was also a training program for his co-workers and it was five months before the store was completed. Bob had resigned from the Mission staff on completion of the new United Church building at Maningrida, and became a staff member of the Maningrida Co-operative Society.

One of Glen's first jobs was to fly to Darwin to meet with the Registrar of Companies to find out what the situation was regarding the threatened deregistration of the Maningrida Co-operative Society. On arrival at the Registrar's office, he was greeted and asked if he was related to Ken Bagshaw, a former Darwin Magistrate, Sheffield Shield cricketer and for many years a star cricketer in the Northern Territory. Glen and Ken were brothers, so a long discourse was held on cricket, as Glen, too, had been a player of some note. Later, he was told that, providing certain rules and requirements of a co-operative society were fulfilled, the deregistration would be held in abeyance pending future performances; so that proved to be a much easier hurdle to jump than anticipated.

The Co-operative Society was the only Aboriginal owned and run organisation at Maningrida. By virtue of that fact, it did not attract any Government funding, so had to generate its own profits to pay its creditors, wages, freight, insurance and other costs. In those days, it was a difficult task in such an isolated area, but, with hard work from Glen, the Aboriginal staff and me, we began to achieve really good results.

In some ways Glen's appointment was viewed by some Government staff as the beginning of the end of their idyllic life-style, as they felt their future was being threatened and eroded by a non-Government organisation.

As the Co-operative Society did not own a vehicle and had no money to purchase one, it was difficult for us, as non-public servants to borrow a vehicle to transfer the stock from the old shop to the newly-completed store, about half a kilometre away. Fortunately, John Hunter, the Superintendent, had a privately owned, clapped-out old Dodge utility which on occasions he kindly made available to us. Because of the cockroach problem, Glen and I decided to move all the stock ourselves. There were literally thousands of the pests — in the pleats of skirts, frocks and trousers, and in pockets and every fold — and we wanted to avoid transferring them to the new premises.

The new store was built at a cost of \$20,000. This was only made possible by two important factors prevailing at that time. The Superintendent, in the best interests of the community, put all the Aboriginal building staff on Training Allowance, and any building materials not being used by the community were made available to the Co-operative Society. Training Allowance for Aborigines had only recently been introduced at Maningrida. This Government payment, which was half that of the basic wage, was available as wages to any adult Aborigines who sought work

and got a job. Nobody was denied the opportunity to work. Prior to this time, very few jobs had been available and, because Aborigines were ineligible for Unemployment Benefits, the cash flow in the community was very limited. With the introduction of Training Allowance and with the increased numbers of people obtaining work, the cash flow increased significantly. This also acted as a catalyst for the creation of many types of new jobs and projects.

No matter how hard Glen and I or the builder and his team worked, the rate of establishing this and other new projects could never have been achieved without the goodwill, support and initiatives of the Superintendent, John Hunter, who at all times put the interests of the community foremost. John Hunter, to all who knew him, had to be the most outstanding Superintendent of the era — a man of vision and action and much respected by Aboriginal people at both Maningrida and surrounding areas.

The new store was opened on Friday, 13 March 1970, by the Head of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Mr Harry Giese, and, to mark the occasion, a Gala mannequin parade was held. The Aboriginal people were the models and displayed a great variety of clothing, men's, women's and children's, and all put on a very polished, professional performance. The parade was very ably compered by Robyn Strong, a school teacher who was a Board member of the Maningrida Co-operative Society. The Aboriginal audience was ecstatic and it was a wonderful day for the whole community — some of the store's suppliers flew out from Darwin for the occasion.

A store, providing it is well managed and stocks a range of suitable merchandise at reasonable prices, is singularly the most important branch of any community. Employment cannot be effectively undertaken if people are not well fed, and education cannot flourish if students are malnourished. Good nutrition reduces many health problems.

At times, and in some places, Europeans went overboard with nutrition and denied Aboriginal people the right to the choice of some of the foods they enjoyed — no white bread, no soft drinks, no tobacco or cigarettes. I can recall drinking gallons of tinned pineapple and orange juice — in the heat one has to drink plenty of fluids but with no other choice I now feel sick at the thought of these particular drinks. I equate them to the castor oil in orange juice my mother used to hand out to me as a child. Brown sugar, brown rice and brown bread were insisted upon. Most Aborigines hated, and many still hate, these particular foods and they, as well as their children, suffered some malnutrition as they would rather go without them than eat food they detested.

The store at Maningrida had ample supplies of groceries, fresh fruits, vegetables, fresh bread, meat, fish and crabs, playing cards and clothing

which were not always available at other settlements. The staff, at no charge, were permitted to eat and drink as they wished during working hours in the store, but anything taken outside had to be paid for.

I heard it said by some people from other communities that Maningrida was looked upon as 'The Sin City of the North' as it was the only non-mission settlement in the area where it was perceived that people could live it up a bit and life had fewer restrictions. On the missions, card playing was frowned upon so cards were not stocked in mission stores, but card playing and gambling still went on as the players manufactured their own cards out of cardboard or paper. Unfortunately, a few women were such avid card players that, as a result, their children became neglected.

By profession, I was a chiropodist, but did not pursue my career in that field as, at the store, I was asked to manage the clothing sections for men, women and children, and also the buying and selling of electrical goods, manchester, canvas goods, fishing gear and motor cycles, to name a few. I guess it does not happen to all to be the sole buyer and arbiter of fashion for a community which had by then grown to over 1,000 people. I always sought advice from the staff and customers as to their preferences, as it was not to be what I personally liked but to be their choice; and it became a great challenge to fulfil their wishes at reasonable prices. Instead of frocks, Aboriginal women prefer skirts and tops, as, often during a ceremony, their upper garments are removed. On our arrival, some of the European women were running up an assortment of skirts and selling them to the shop, so to them our presence was disastrous, as their little gold mine was shut down because the quality of their products was not always commensurate with their charges to the store. Some commercial travellers used to make me livid when they would talk about native or gins' frocks and, accordingly, their orders were kept to a minimum.

In those early days, John F Trim of Adelaide was a major supplier of clothing and other goods. Later, there were other suppliers including G & R Wills, ALPA and Conway Agencies who added to the range of goods available.

The instances of Aboriginal stores in the north of South Australia and the Northern Territory 'going broke' have been and still are absolutely scandalous. In some cases this has, in part, been due to a few unscrupulous travellers, who, of course, like us all, needed to make a living, but were unprincipled enough to accept without question mammoth orders from inexperienced store managers when, in all honesty, they knew that no store of the size with which they were dealing could possibly have used such quantities in a lifetime. Often, too, when the goods arrived, the stores could not afford to pay for them, but the traveller, of course, would have received his commission. Some warehouses were also forced into liquidation because of this practice. I have had the opportunity of visiting many Aboriginal community stores in those same areas and the mountains

of leftover, unsuitable and unsaleable stock appalled me. Both in the fields of clothing and groceries, some of these over-buys are happening even today.

None of us, however, is infallible; on one occasion, a member of our staff put the quantity of goods required in the wrong column and we had enough mousetraps to cope with one of the world's worst mice plagues. The children eventually used them for toys — hopefully they did not get their fingers caught. Aboriginal children often used to drag around a small, old wheel or tin on a wire or a string for amusement, but, with requests over the years, a whole range of toys, including some quite sophisticated varieties, was stocked.

Supplies for the store and other projects were usually brought to Maningrida by either the *Warrender* or *Fourcroy* which were barges owned by the VB Perkins Company of Darwin. This Company's service was at times, after a rough trip, much criticised, probably unjustly, because it was often under very difficult conditions that they provided this service which was a lifeline for communities such as ours. A few supplies were flown in by Connair's regular service, but the overall cost of air freight was generally prohibitive.

Dry goods mainly came from Associated Co-operative Wholesalers in Adelaide, with most frozen and refrigerated goods coming from Hickman Distributors in Darwin. The barge would arrive at all hours on the incoming tide and, because it could only berth at high tide, it had to be smartly unloaded for it to sail on the following high tide approximately 12 hours later. In the early days, the Co-operative Society had no fork-lift or other equipment, so human chain-gangs were formed to do the unloading. Sometimes, help and equipment were forthcoming from Government departments and personnel.

Marine insurance was imperative as, at times, the seas along the coast were very rough, with gigantic waves. The result of this was that the Co-operative's cargo was absolutely swamped and the decks were awash, causing a colossal mess and much damage, especially before palletisation, containerisation and plastic shrink wrapping came into vogue. Sugar would be soaked and spilt; they say it is good luck to spill sugar — don't you believe it! Powdered milk tins and flour drums would be dented and broken and their spilt contents increased the mess. The addition of thousands of cans of soft drinks rolling loose around the decks added to this disastrous situation.

Because of the great floods after Cyclone Tracy late in 1974, the Maningrida Progress Association container of goods from Adelaide was stranded at the flooded Finke River in the Red Centre, and it took so long for the floods to recede that it was eventually five months before we were able to take delivery of the goods and set about making our insurance

claim. Glen flew from Maningrida to Perth and arranged for supplies to be shipped to Darwin and then forwarded by barge to Maningrida for that interim period.

In 1971, it was decided that the store should change over to self-service, and the locals took to it like ducks to water; profits increased, especially when Training Allowance ceased and full Award wages and Unemployment Benefits were introduced.

Initially, our staff of Tommy and Joe was adequate. We grew very fond of them but felt that we needed another Aboriginal member of staff, so decided it would be a good idea to employ a young woman to help with the clothing section. This caused some eyebrows to be raised, as nowhere in any Aboriginal store in the Northern Territory had this ever been tried before. At first, it created much opposition as people would not be served by Susan, but would wait for Tommy or Joe. Eventually, we said that if the customers ignored her help, they would not be served by anybody else, and it did not really take too long for her to be accepted by her own people. She became the very first female, Aboriginal shop assistant in an Aboriginal store in the Northern Territory. Now, of course women are the major part of the staff in most supermarkets on Aboriginal communities. Some of them are really outstanding cash register operators and I would back their skills and performance against southern check-out operators any time. Some are also very skilful in other areas of store work such as ordering, pricing, marking goods and stacking shelves.

Susan married and later decided to leave because she was pregnant, and then more Aboriginal female staff were employed — Lily Gurambara and Helen Williams being two of them. Lily had an absolutely wonderful memory. She knew the correct price of everything in the store. Anybody in doubt just had to show Lily the item and she would rattle off the price like a computer, whilst probably at the same time sitting and working at her checkout as well as breast feeding her baby. Breast feeding is, of course, a very natural process, and is treated as such by Aboriginal women — often bare bosoms were the order of the day and nobody took any notice.

Like Susan, Lily and Helen were so enthusiastic and interested in store procedures that I decided that if they were interested and agreeable, as an educational project, I would take them down south to visit clothing factories, warehouses, large stores and generally have a look at cities like Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide. They thought it would be great, so everything was organised. At the last minute, Lily had second thoughts, which, as it happened, may have been just as well as she was troubled by a batch of very severe boils and I am sure was far better off at home with her family. Susan had previously been for a trip to Adelaide with her husband to attend a Scout Jamboree.

Helen still wanted to go on the trip, so the two of us set out and had a great and informative time. People were most impressed with her ability. She had been in Mark's class at school and could run rings around him in mathematics. He now has two university degrees. If the same opportunities had been available to Helen, I am sure she too would have been a university graduate. She wrote orders and generally showed a great deal of interest and ability in all facets of the trip. She told Lily all about her experiences when she returned and I think that, over all, it gave her a great deal more confidence in dealing with European people. She later became a Commissioner with the Aboriginal Development Commission, representing the people of Arnhem Land — a very responsible and prestigious appointment.

CHAPTER 4

ABORIGINES

To many Europeans, the life of an Aborigine seems a very simple, carefree, aimless existence; but, on living side by side with these people, one, in a small way, soon begins to realise the complexities of their lives. This is especially so for those Aborigines living in the more traditional tribal situations where they are bound by very strict tribal and cultural laws. Most white women, if confronted with similar laws in our society, would crack up and rebel, especially in the area of promised marriages and family relationships. It definitely is a man's world! Recently, I was surprised to hear, when we were queuing up for a meal at an Aboriginal function, the elderly man in charge say, 'Ladies first' — men in the past always had been accorded priority in receiving their Social Service cheques and doing such things as their shopping.

Polygamy is widely practised in Aboriginal communities. One of our shop staff was telling me that her eldest daughter was promised to an older man who already had five wives and, as far as she was concerned, her daughter was not going to be wife number six, but would be sent right away to avoid this happening. She said that years ago, she would not even have been brave enough to think about doing such a thing.

In accordance with Aboriginal customs, some customers were not allowed to enter the shop while certain staff members were present, but had to wait outside and send in a proxy to do their shopping, or in reverse, the staff members had to be hidden from view whilst the other person came in and made his or her own selection. One such custom is that when a couple marry, the husband is not permitted to see or be seen by or talk to his mother-in-law. In several stores the cry would go up, 'There's no room', alerting people to the fact that there was a relationship problem and a staff member had to disappear. Aunts and uncles play a very significant role in the bringing up of their nieces and nephews.

Aboriginal culture has worked and survived for at least 40,000 years, but for some time now, a percentage of the younger generation, who have had more contact with white people or have been away for higher education, have watched television or had more opportunity, with improved transport

facilities, to visit other communities or go on trips south, are now trying, in part, to buck the old system. Some young Aboriginal men told me that, under the old system, they probably would not have been able to take a young wife until perhaps the death of an older brother, when his widow might then take up residence with one of the deceased's brothers, but this is not necessarily a hard and fast rule in terms of practice. Basically, it is up to the widow and the brothers; she, in fact, may choose to live with somebody else altogether.

At times you would think a couple may be mother and son; she may even be old enough to be his grandmother, but they are husband and wife. On the other hand, practically from birth, young girls are promised to older men who could be mistaken for their grandfathers. Some prospective child brides have tried to run away to avoid being taken by their promised husbands. There are more and more young people seeking partners their own age and of their own choice and not necessarily within their own tribal structure. There is no formal marriage ceremony in traditional Aboriginal culture and, even today, there would only be a limited number who would seek a church wedding. It seemed the rigidity of the enforcement of these customs varied from community to community.

Sometimes on a trip out bush, we would have on board one of the tribal disciplinarians, who would tell us of how he had speared this one and that, and show us where their bodies were buried under various trees along the way. It appeared he had meted out the very severe, punishment of death appropriate to people who had breached certain tribal laws. At one time, a staff member had been playing up while her husband was away. On his return, we saw two spears hurtling through the air, one of them penetrating the upper leg of the man she had been with. He fortunately survived. The young woman also received her punishment — a severe thrashing.

From what we were told by Aboriginal people and from our own observations, we were made aware that in some areas various forms of sorcery are still pursued.

Often the drone of the didgeridoo and the resonant sound and beat of the ironwood clap sticks would indicate a corroboree was taking place. Sometimes it would continue throughout the night. By way of paintings, stories, songs and dance, Aboriginal culture has been handed down from generation to generation. They had no written language.

Glen and the boys were invited to view their first Young Man's circumcision ceremony, and were seated close to where the operation was being performed. Being a woman, I sat a short distance away. When completed, the lad, who had been biting on a small woven pandanus pad to help withstand the pain, seemingly semi-conscious, was carried off to the bush for a few days to recuperate under the guidance and tender care of chosen people from the tribe. The women danced as part of their

involvement in this ceremony, their faces painted with splashes of white ochre.

Dancing plays a very important part in rituals and ceremonies and, on other occasions, for visitors to the communities, specially choreographed dances were performed with great artistry, expertise and enthusiasm.

At night, the glow of the camp fires and their spiralling smoke was always present as was the smell of eucalypt wafting across the evening air. The women had as one of their particular chores to gather wood in the late afternoon and it was often a heavy load that they carried so skilfully balanced on their heads. At times they had to walk quite some distance back to their camp.

The soles of the feet of most Aboriginal people must be very tough. In the blistering heat, they were able to walk upon ground which to us would be like walking on red-hot coals. Some of these same people would then walk straight into the freezer room of the store, barefooted. It used to make me shudder to see them. The introduction of sneakers and thongs, though, has been appreciated by many.

At Maningrida some of the Aboriginal people spent part of their leisure time engaged in different sporting activities. Often from the sidelines a great deal of barracking would take place and the shout 'yakay' would be heard as the supporters cheered the achievements of some of their friends and team mates.

Many Aborigines are very agile and athletic. A number of communities have Sports Weekends, which are very well attended and enjoyed by all. Football is a favourite sport and many become star players, finding positions in southern League teams. The 1989 South Australian Magarey Medal for best and fairest footballer in the League teams was awarded to Gilbert McAdam of Alice Springs — the first Aboriginal person to receive such an honour. Men also enjoy basketball, while basketball and softball are played by the women. Music, too, especially in the form of Rock and Roll and Country and Western, is enjoyed, with many playing their own guitars. Some groups of young people get together to form their own bands. Spear fishing is an area where Aborigines really excel, and it is unbelievable to see how adept they are with a fish wire.

The Boy Scout Troop had quite a number of successful years of operation under John Wilders, the Assistant Superintendent, with a number of Scouts attending Jamborees down south. Gowan Armstrong was the leader of the Cub Pack. Unfortunately, as so often happens with the departure of the leaders, the enthusiasm of the locals waned. Mark, as a white member of the Cub Pack, enjoyed camps in the bush with his Aboriginal friends which was a unique experience. Girls had the opportunity of joining the Brownies. The YMCA from time to time was

represented in the community and provided another source of leisure activities.

In an effort to control the consumption of alcohol at Maningrida, a club was formed with the local adult Aboriginal people being allowed to purchase two cans of beer per night; this was later increased to three. With the availability of the motor vehicle, people were able to travel on grog runs during the Dry Season and, unfortunately, alcoholism increased. Some children looking for 'kicks' turned to petrol or glue sniffing. Several people from Goulburn Island died after drinking printer's ink. At Maningrida alcohol is now only allowed in on the barge once a fortnight, in limited quantities, so for a few days, drunkenness is in evidence. When we arrived at Maningrida, we could not understand why there were so many large catering size bottles of vanilla essence in stock, but we found that, as well as some brands of cough syrup, this put people on a high.

Aboriginal babies are adorable, but we were told in some areas, because of superstitions, to have twins creates problems as some mothers will only look after one baby while the other is either brought up by a relative, adopted or fostered out to European people. An Aboriginal girl was fostered out for some time to a European family in Darwin because, I understand, the Welfare Department considered her mother to be unstable and not capable of looking after her child. The mother, however, loved her daughter and, although the family in Darwin would have loved to adopt her, the mother was still very upset and, understandably, wanted her daughter returned home. At that time, Senator Gordon Bryant was Minister for Aboriginal Affairs; he personally visited Maningrida and talked with the girl's family. Shortly after, she was returned to her natural parents. On a number of occasions when I saw her out in the bush, she looked very happy to be back home with her family, even though she had left behind the city luxuries she had grown to enjoy.

In most communities white stirrers were present — complaining about how Aboriginal culture was being broken down and eroded. This sounded admirable until, with some, you would see in the back of their vehicle on the way out bush, cartons of beer to boost their own popularity with the locals; the abuse of alcohol is, of course, one of the greatest destroyers of any culture, be it black or white. Others were trying to gain support for some particular hobby horse they were pursuing. On occasions tribal Aborigines were concerned about urban Aborigines making decisions for them and stirring up trouble. They felt southerners had little knowledge of the needs of the more traditional people in the north.

Not long after the Maningrida Progress Association took delivery of its first Toyota, Glen was obliged to fly to Darwin on business. The Superintendent was absent from the community, and our sixteen-year-old son, Geoff, was home on school holidays from Adelaide, when there was a knock on our door. There stood four very tall men of the Gunardba tribe

wanting to know if I would drive them 40 kilometres to Balpanarda Swamp for a ceremony. I told them to come back in half an hour as I wanted to get approval to go on this trip. I was told by someone in authority that in no way should I undertake to do such a thing as, in this person's opinion, they were the fiercest, most troublesome and warlike people anywhere in the area. Home I went where I found them still waiting, their gentle persuasion becoming more vigorous and more firmly applied. I made a snap decision and threw caution to the winds, as Geoff said he would drive. We piled into the front of the vehicle and were directed to the local camp to pick up mobs of people and gear. Our hearts really sank and I am sure, beat quite a bit faster as we saw them loading on machetes, guns, spears, axes and knives. But, undaunted? we bravely? set off for the appointed destination under their direction, along roads, bush tracks and across country until we finally reached the camp site and unloaded the vehicle. We then headed back home with a great sigh of relief that our mission had been accomplished without incident. We were to find that these same people were some of the friendliest in the area, although this opinion was not shared by a relieving Superintendent and his wife, who were not just scared but were petrified of these Gunardba men. They fled the settlement never to return.

One of our European staff members fell in love with a young Aboriginal woman, but of course she was already promised to an elderly Aboriginal man. She was definitely not interested in her elderly 'promise'. The new friendship continued and Aboriginal tensions mounted. At about 10 o'clock one night, this staff member came to our home to tell us that he had had word that the girl was leaving her remote home along one of the rivers, in a tiny bark canoe in which she had to travel down the river to its mouth and then battle the rough, open sea to make her escape, and she wanted him to meet her at one of the remote beaches. We warned him that, because there was so much opposition to this friendship, his life might be in danger, but he said he would risk his life to help his friend. He met with her at the appointed place, but his life really was in jeopardy and threats of death ensued and he was forced to leave the community. The two of them went to Darwin, but after a short time, the relationship cooled.

One day, an Aboriginal woman, who had been fighting with her husband, raced into the Hasty Tasty, the take-away food outlet at Maningrida, where I was working. She dived in behind the counter next to me. He followed her with his spear at the ready. Eventually, while he was being pacified by his relatives, she was able to crawl out on hands and knees and escape through the back door.

On another occasion, prior to a funeral, I had to hide from a rain of spears, not directed at me personally but, because one of the mourners was seeking reprisals for the death of a relative. I was involved because of my proximity to the scene as the driver of the Progress Association vehicle,

which was needed to be used either as the hearse or the mourning coach. It was eventually decided that I was to be the driver of the latter.

With the death of an Aboriginal person at Maningrida, traditional rituals and ceremonies were performed, whilst the actual burial services at the cemetery were usually presided over by the Uniting Church minister. On some occasions, it was interesting to see ceremonial designs carved into the ground around the plot and, later, a tent or tarpaulin was sometimes erected over the grave site to protect it, and gifts placed there as a memorial to the deceased. Before, during and after the ceremony, much wailing would be done by the women, and they would inflict horrific 'sorry cuts' upon themselves. These included chopping their heads, arms or legs with a tomahawk or knives. The hospital staff sometimes had to work overtime to stitch up the wounds and stem the flow of blood. Personal possessions of the deceased would be set alight and the house or dwelling vacated for perhaps months — a few houses also were burnt to the ground. In some cases, the bones of the deceased are later exhumed, crushed and placed in hollow log coffins and returned to their tribal land. The name of the deceased is never uttered again — 'pay-backs' invariably occur, which at times have led to further deaths.

CHAPTER 5

DAY BY DAY

In the early seventies, it was disquieting to walk along the beach and see discarded clothing, purchased only a few days earlier, lying at the water's edge. After some time, this practice ceased as garments were laundered and re-used. Now, I would venture to say, many Aborigines would use greater amounts of shampoo, soap powder and bleach than most Europeans.

Some of our staff would arrive at work looking positively scruffy, as they often slept in the same clothes they had been wearing during the day. They would then buy a new outfit, have a shower, and look very smart.

When it was really hot, I learned some fashion pointers from the Aboriginal women — a pair of ladies' or children's briefs or a T-shirt were worn on their heads — the elastic waistband or the neckband at the hair line and the rest of the garment flowing over the head and neck. For myself, in the very hot weather, I found a hat was a necessity to combat the constant glare and prevent skin cancers. It would be quite easy to let one's appearance go, especially with no visit to a hairdresser for months on end between trips to Darwin. I tried to dress reasonably well, keeping in mind the environment and climatic conditions.

In our twenty years of being connected with Aboriginal communities, we have handled and counted millions of dollars in copper, silver, notes and cheques: generally, the copper was discarded by our customers as nuisance money. I always felt money to be one of the most effective ways of spreading disease. At times it was difficult to distinguish to which denomination the notes belonged. The money would be tied in handkerchiefs, in purses, wallets, brought out of socks, shoes, pockets, ladies' bras, underwear, or hats. Some of the people suffering from leprosy, who had lost all their fingers, would use their mouths to extricate notes. I am sure the bank tellers did not relish having to count the stores' takings. Most Aboriginal children seemed to be more self-reliant at a much earlier age than their white counterparts and, when only knee high to a grasshopper, often naked, would come into the shop with their own money to do their shopping. One day an 18-month-old child climbed up

the side of the small freezer to get an ice-cream so I asked him if he had any money as he obviously did not have any in his hands and he was stark naked. Sure enough, he was able to pay for his ice-cream as he spat out the correct amount from his mouth! Luckily, at Maningrida, we must have become immune to most of the diseases and hardly had a day's sickness — perhaps the pineapple and orange juice did keep us healthy.

We also changed thousands and thousands of Social Service cheques and were horrified to see such undignified and degrading European-type names on some of them — Jumbo, Spinifex, Jackie 16 mile, Jack Deadwood, Captain Kookaburra, Hobbles, Crowfoot, Ginger Packsaddle, Motorbike Paddy, Quart Pot, Chuck-a-duck; and one woman was called Mary Motor-carbon. In the early days, most of the recipients of Social Service cheques could neither read nor write, and thumb prints were used as identification instead of signatures. Later, thumb prints were superseded; the people would then make a cross for their signature. It is remarkable just how many ways there are of putting a cross together. Now, in 1993, many European names are used and numbers of cheques are correctly signed. Some people with jobs use credit cards.

On most communities, I estimated Aboriginal-owned dogs would outnumber people three to one. Some of them were the most mangy creatures it would be possible to find and surely would have to be one of the greatest health hazards. However, there has been a discernible decrease in the less healthy specimens. Children would often sit on the ground, probably next to a heap of rubbish, eating some tasty morsel, with a dog also sharing and enjoying that same morsel. Some of the dogs were really vicious. Fortunately, if we approached, they would be called to heel. On one occasion, I went to deliver a book to a policeman's wife at the house across the road from where we lived. I was only there a moment or two, said good-bye and, as I walked around the side of the house, I felt as though I had been hit by a train. I had not even seen the policeman's bull terrier in the yard, but I certainly felt it, as it sank its teeth into the back of my leg. I was dumbfounded and did not want to loiter, so hurriedly went on my way home. Later, I told them what had happened and, as a similar thing had happened to someone else a few days earlier, they decided the dog was getting far too vicious, so it had to be put down.

Swimming in the sea, unfortunately, was definitely out of the question. I just would not put a toe in the water, except to board the boat from time to time — sea wasps, jelly fish, crocodiles, sea snakes, sharks, saw-fish stingrays, coral, stone fish as well as other types of dangerous sea life all threatened the unwary. Several children died from the sting of a sea wasp. At certain times of the year, in the Dry Season, the water was said to be safe from sea wasps, but I definitely was not chancing it.

For some time I assisted Gowan Armstrong who was running an Arts and Crafts project; this project was later managed by Dan Gillespie and Peter

Cooke for the Maningrida Progress Association. Some of the most wonderful bark paintings, didgeridoos, woven baskets and mats were created in this area. It was absolutely incredible to see how some of the artists who had leprosy and, with only a thumb and no fingers, could do such exquisite work, not with brushes or modern paints, but with a tiny strip of pandanus leaf and using local ochres and orchid juice. From time to time, I would take a truckload of people out bush for the day and leave them to collect and process the pandanus leaves for their weaving, and to gather and boil up roots to dye the processed leaves in a variety of colours in the autumn tonings. Other people gathered fibres from beneath the bark of certain trees. These fibres were rubbed together on a person's leg to form string, from which dilly bags were woven. Other dilly bags, which were also used for hunting and foraging, were woven from pandanus leaves and had the same, previously mentioned string as handles. The women carried these dilly bags on their backs. The bags were held in place by the string handles which were positioned around their foreheads. Feathers, too, were woven into some of these bags but this practice was phased out so that the bird life of the area would not become too depleted.

If they had time the gatherers also enjoyed hunting for a goanna or two, or collecting sugar bag, also known as wild honey, which was a prized find, whilst some of the men would gather heavy sheets of bark to be used for bark paintings. I always dreaded the return trip as, with the increased weight, however well I tried to position and balance the load, we always seemed to have a list to either port or starboard.

As the custodians of their land, Aboriginal people help to control the ecology of their environment with their systematic burning off of the undergrowth and trees. The eucalypts especially respond very quickly to this seemingly harsh treatment, and within days, new shoots would begin to appear and very rapid growth soon follow.

An open day was held at Maningrida when some of the older generation of Aborigines showed off their skills, making bark canoes, weaving fish nets and traps, and building bush houses of leaves and branches. There was also food tasting: turtle, flying fox and snakes. A really exciting and informative day it proved to be.

Some years later, Peter Cooke, who for a time was on the Maningrida Progress Association Out-station staff, established a museum for the preservation and safe keeping for posterity of many of the above and other artefacts. The Drysdales and Bagshaws, having left Maningrida, were invited to return to attend the opening. Unfortunately, I was unable to go, but Glen went along with Mr and Mrs Drysdale.

CHAPTER 6

SILAS ROBERTS

Silas Roberts was one of Maningrida's leading citizens; he originally came from Roper River, but moved for personal reasons. He was not forgotten by his family and relatives who would arrive in great numbers to visit him. He was quite well educated and was on a variety of committees and boards in the Aboriginal scene.

He had a cheque account in Darwin, and frequently asked me to help him balance his budget to prevent his going into the red. It was traditional for Aborigines to give hospitality to their visiting relatives, who, in the past, could have walked considerable distances. With the advent of charter flights, Silas's relations would arrive by plane and stay for ages, until it became necessary for him to decide whether to charter another plane to get them back home or have the expense of providing for them at Maningrida. With modern transportation, it seemed that this part of the traditional system could become a financial burden.

Silas, a real gentleman, led a very busy and stressful life. He was a church member and would occasionally take the service. Sometimes he would come into my office for a chat just to get things off his chest. He said he was sure that most white people did not appreciate how difficult and stressful it was, especially for tribal Aborigines, to be called away to meetings in Darwin and Canberra, particularly when new policies were being formulated — one day to be in the bush, eating traditional foods, and the next, lunching with the Prime Minister. He was genuinely concerned for his people and their rights. Unfortunately, he did not live long enough to see all his dreams fulfilled.

The Silas Roberts Hostel for Aboriginal People in Darwin was named in his honour.

CHAPTER 7

COMMUNICATIONS AND LOCAL SCENE

The introduction of the 'Pedal Wireless' in the mid-1920s assisted many people in the outback of Australia, especially in times of emergency and sickness. It also gave friendly contact to people in isolated areas of the bush, many of whom, up to that time, had been very lonely. My grandfather, the Reverend Robert Mitchell, was a Presbyterian Minister who established the Smith of Dunesk Mission at Beltana in the outback of South Australia due to his friendship and association with the Reverend Dr John Flynn. As a child, I was able to be present at one of the trial transmissions of this form of communication carried out by the inventor, Mr Alfred Traeger, from my parents home at Morphettville, South Australia, to the Australian Broadcasting Commission studios in Hindmarsh Square, Adelaide.

John Flynn, the originator of the Australian Inland Mission, served for many years in the Northern Territory and later, through his initiatives, the Royal Flying Doctor Service was established. This service casts a 'mantle of safety' over the outback people of Australia. I was reminded of those early days because, at the time of our arrival at Maningrida, that community had only a small radio, which was used for communicating with the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in Darwin. That Department was then responsible for health, education, social welfare, home management, government store and the community kitchen.

Later, at Maningrida, a radio-telephone was applied for and, of course, when it eventually arrived, no person or organisation wanted the responsibility of looking after it, but all wanted to avail themselves of its convenience — that is, if you could call it convenience. It was eventually installed in the store and it was one of the most frustrating forms of communication known. In the Wet, there would be so much atmospheric interference that reception was absolutely disastrous, with indefinite delays, hour after hour or even day after day. To try to place a call, one had to watch and wait for a tiny red light to change to green, but if you were not fast enough, a person on the same frequency would jump in ahead of you; and on and on the interminable delays would continue. It

unfortunately was my responsibility to supervise it for some time; later, Elva Dickfoss took over that role.

The method of sorting and distributing mail after it had been despatched by plane from Darwin, was proving to be less than satisfactory, as there was not enough security, especially with the increased numbers of Social Security cheques; once sorted in the Department of Aboriginal Affairs office, they were left in pigeon-holes for the public to collect. An application for the establishment of a Post Office was approved, so I was asked to fly to the RAAF Base in Darwin to have tuition in the finer points of post office procedures at their Post Office. I then had the dubious honour of being Maningrida's first official Postmistress and bank agent to add to my already long list of chores. Later, Elva took over these services also.

Some selfish European people in the community soon reared their heads, wanting after-hours phone calls, and mail to be sorted if a plane arrived on Saturday afternoon, Sunday or a Public Holiday. They had little thought for those who worked much longer hours, including Saturday mornings. Of course, if there was an emergency we were only too happy to oblige.

One day, the man in charge of Forestry asked Glen if he would give credit at the store to one of his new employees, who had just arrived. Glen took one look at the person and said, 'No' — to arrive with no visible means of support was not his idea of a good credit rating. After thoroughly abusing Glen, the Forestry boss said, 'All right, our staff will put up the money', which they did and they were to be repaid when the new employee's pay cheque arrived. Little did they know that this new staff member had booked his seat back to Darwin for the same day his pay was due to arrive and he duly flew out that day, leaving them all lamenting.

The Europeans at Maningrida numbered about 200. Their very presence seemed to have a smothering effect on the Aboriginal population, some of whom felt that they were losing a grip of their own land and that the whole future of their society was being threatened, especially as Europeans were making most decisions for them. Their land was being carved up by the Forestry Department — trees were being felled and used in the saw mill, which operated at a loss, so had to close, and most Aborigines did not seem too unhappy because of its closure. Sacred sites were sometimes desecrated with little or no regard.

The traditional land owner of Maningrida was most unhappy about the whole situation. At that time he received no rental or compensation for the use of his land occupied by so many Aboriginal groups, and was generally sickened and frustrated by the influx of so many intruders, Aboriginal and European, and all the 'humbug' they caused. It was not only the quantity, but in some instances, the calibre of the European personnel which left

much to be desired. They came from the whole spectrum of society and sexual preferences.

He was also very concerned about the number of charter aircraft which were arriving with a cargo of grog, so he flew to Canberra to find out his rights. He was told he had supreme power, but, unfortunately, he was outnumbered and overruled by so many Aboriginal strangers living on his land.

Our organisation had fewer restrictions than the Public Service and we were able to do our own thing responsibly and not be bound by masses of red tape, as in the government sector. At times we wondered at what appeared to us to be waste of government property and goods. There must have been kilometre after kilometre of fencing and barbed wire left to deteriorate in the bush. Dozens and dozens of drums of weevily flour were dumped from the government store, as well as broken-down vehicles and equipment, which, if gathered together, would have been enough to cause a public outcry.

A new government-owned kitchen was built at great cost and there it stood for many months awaiting the approval of a building inspector from Darwin. He would not give his authorisation for the building to be used, as there was some very slight irregularity in its construction, which in no way would have affected the building or its operation. Finally, with no further alteration, it was opened, but a few months later was closed because the whole policy of government kitchens was scrapped! When the Maningrida Progress Association built a new take-away food outlet, it was able to acquire some of the kitchen equipment, because, in actual fact, it was cheaper to give it away to us than to have to transport it to another location.

Regular community meetings of Departmental Heads were held at Maningrida to try to co-ordinate ideas for future development. Over a period of about five years, there was a gradual decrease in government personnel, and with more projects being started by the Progress Association, additional staff were employed by that organisation to help train Aborigines in various types of new jobs, thus enabling more people to gain meaningful employment.

CHAPTER 8

MANINGRIDA PROGRESS ASSOCIATION

In 1969, the Government's policy for Aborigines was Assimilation, which followed the policy of Segregation. Under this policy a number of part-Aboriginal children around Australia were forcibly taken from their families and sent to mission stations such as Croker Island, or to government institutions. Others were fostered out to white families, apparently because the government of the time wished to avoid what they considered to be a National Shame. This was a diabolical situation which certainly, in today's thinking, would never even be contemplated.

It certainly must have been a very traumatic time to which I am sure people like the former head of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Mr Charles Perkins, can attest. It is no wonder some of them are still bitter and suffering from such inhumane treatment. Many lost contact with their families and have no idea of their true identity. Ironically, because of that twist of fate, some of these part-Aborigines were to receive a much better education than under normal circumstances, with some now having top jobs in Aboriginal organisations; others have become thorns in the side of the government.

Under Assimilation, the Superintendent at each of the communities in the Northern Territory had supreme powers at the settlement, in consultation with the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in Darwin and Canberra.

One of the main reasons for Glen's appointment as Business Manager of the Maningrida Co-operative Society was, as previously mentioned, because Training Allowance had come into being. Many availed themselves of this opportunity to work and have money to spend, especially as the store had an increased range of food and clothing available. We had a staff of approximately 70 working on Aboriginal projects and the place was really alive and well.

The Co-operative Society's finances were helped greatly because the store takings rose dramatically. The Maningrida Co-operative Society was initially formed by a number of people, both Aboriginal and European, each owning ten one pound shares. There had never been sufficient profits

for any dividend to be paid to the shareholders, and, in the foreseeable future, all profits would be needed to increase stock, capital equipment and the development of new projects, as well as a considerable sum being paid to the Australian Tax Office.

Later, it was decided to liquidate the Co-operative Society in favour of a Progress Association. The name Progress Association seemed a misnomer to me. It conjured up thoughts of erecting swings in play grounds and other community activities, but it was to run a far wider and more interesting gambit than that; the name had to be used, however, as it put us in a certain category for taxation purposes. After advertising to try and find the shareholders, the necessary majority was located and offered \$3 per share. Some took the money, others asked that it be kept to assist with the development of the Progress Association.

With increased pressure of work and the demand for the establishment of new enterprises, a Store Manager was employed and Glen was appointed overall General Manager. In our time, we had three store managers, Graham Inglis, Tom Swain and Andrew Henderson, with Max Summers and Phil Brain as assistants. From the store's profits, \$50,000 was earmarked for a new take-away food outlet and restaurant called the Hasty Tasty. Once again, Bob Cross showed his outstanding capabilities in the building field. Christine Rackermann was employed for the day-to-day running of the clothing sections, whilst I still controlled the buying as well as running the new take-away. In the Hasty Tasty, Gladys Pascoe was our chef for the evening meals, which she prepared to a very high standard. Luscious salads were made from fresh produce from the Gunardba gardens and enjoyed by Aborigines as well as Europeans.

For the take-away, we had quite a number of the usual foods, but concentrated on chickens and fish and chips, not the ordinary run-of-the-mill variety — barramundi about a metre long were cut into three and cooked, making a delectable and substantial meal. Tuna cutlets, as well as small moon fish and snapper, cooked whole, also appeared on the menu. The chips were often made from sweet potatoes, also from the gardens. As a nourishing and tasty snack for the children, we served for 20 cents, spaghetti, baked beans or sardines on toast, which they thoroughly enjoyed.

CHAPTER 9

THE BAKERY

Because bread had to be imported by air from Darwin, it became a very costly commodity and, as we did not have sufficient refrigeration or freezer space to store large quantities, Glen decided, in consultation with the Maningrida Progress Association Board, that one of his first projects would be to establish a bakery at Maningrida. After finishing the store, Bob Cross was called upon to build the bakery. But for his dedication and skill, Maningrida would not have been the same place. In all, he built the church, the store, the bakery, Town Hall, Hasty Tasty, six staff houses, five bush stores, and undertook countless other tasks of gigantic proportions. He was a perfectionist and a very versatile tradesperson; and so obliging. I am sure the poor man used to shudder every time he saw Glen or me approaching as there was so much scope and potential for change and improvement that we always seemed to be thinking up new ideas. Being a true Christian gentleman, however, he always willingly obliged. He was a bachelor and had not taken a holiday for years until we practically forced him to do so. On vacation, he met Heather Jackson and they were married shortly after. She then worked as a nursing sister at Maningrida.

When the bakery was almost completed, we purchased the necessary equipment and had to bring an expert from Victoria to install an oil-fired oven. With that in place, applications were called from around Australia for a baker, who was prepared to teach his baking skills to some of the Aboriginal people, and his wife to work in the shop, selling the goodies and training female staff. Les Holt, a retired baker from Albury, saw our advertisement in the Albury Border Mail and he and his wife, Isabel, were employed and both worked very hard. Les turned out some of the most luscious cakes and pies, and the best bread I have ever tasted. In conjunction with dietitians from the Health Department, he formulated a special, nutritious bread recipe which was enjoyed by all. Les and Isabel did an excellent job during the twelve months of their stay.

As most of the staff were unable to read or write, they were not able to understand the recipe until Les had all the weights and measures painted in different colours with the corresponding colour on the packets or labels of the ingredients, and this worked very well.

Tom Toole succeeded Les Holt and he, too, was a great baker, as was Malcolm Grivell. Later, as a result of the training and support provided by the professional bakers, the Aboriginal staff expressed a desire to manage and run the bakery themselves and I was given the job of keeping my eye on the bakery and assisting if help was needed during this transition to self-management.

Being a doubting Thomas, I set the alarm for 4.30 am for the first few mornings just to check if the staff had arrived. Fortunately, I could see if the bakery light was aglow from the comfort of my bed. I should have had more faith as I was never let down, that was, until one Monday morning when Jimmy Bunguru, the boss, failed to appear. I knew he and one of the other bakers had gone for the weekend to an out-station about 48 kilometres south-west of Maningrida and had arranged with some of their countrymen, who had gone on to the border store near Oenpelli to purchase some grog, to pick them up on their return trip. They forgot, and at last Jim and his friend realised that they were not going to be picked up and that, if they were to be at work on time next morning, they had better start walking. Word came to us that confirmed that the vehicle had in fact returned without Jim, so up I got to open the bakery and, with the help of the other men, kneaded the dough and generally got things under way for the day. They always laughed at my kneading skills or lack thereof — they thought I was far too heavy handed. Anyway, that day's bread was quite successful!

The day wore on and still no sign of Jim and we were all very worried as he was such a conscientious person. I had an early start again the next morning, but later, we were to find out why Jim and his friend had not arrived.

Bob Cross had taken a truck to search for the lost bakers and eventually came across the pair. They told him they had swum crocodile infested rivers in between walking, and were so tired they stopped and lit a fire. Aborigines generally sleep very soundly indeed, and on this occasion, they had done just that and, whilst asleep, Jim had rolled into the fire and sustained third degree burns to his back. On their return, their first stop was the Hospital, but Jim, who was a terrific person, insisted that he had to get to the bakery to supervise his staff. The Hospital staff used to visit the bakery to treat and dress his nasty burns.

The only time I ever saw Jim give in was when he had excruciating toothache and it was with the greatest difficulty that I persuaded him to fly to Darwin to have the offending tooth extracted. He certainly was a very happy man on his return.

When the Out-station Movement really got under way, Jim said he would love to return to his homeland, but paid us the compliment of saying that

while we remained at Maningrida, he, too, would remain and run the bakery, which he did.

As previously mentioned, the indigenous people were Gunavidji, as were most of the staff of the bakery — Jimmy Bunguru the boss, Jackie Adajalar, a gregarious, likeable character, Long Willie and Crowfoot, both men of few words. Crowfoot was very well regarded amongst his people and it was to the astonishment of all that he actually sought a job in the bakery, as he had never sought employment before. There were also on the staff members of another language group.

The staff all got on extremely well until one of the members of the other language group fell in love with a Gunavidji girl. As some of the staff took it in turn to fire the oven, it necessitated the person on duty holding the bakery keys overnight. Jim arrived at our house early one morning in a very distressed state as, on the flour bags, were the imprints of two bodies, which meant the non-Gunavidji young man, who had held the keys overnight, had been entertaining his Gunavidji girlfriend in the bakery. This was like a red rag to a bull so, to save a great deal of tribal tension, we moved that staff member to our take-away food outlet, the Hasty Tasty. Later, permission was granted for them to marry. After a tempestuously short marriage, they split up. Amongst other things, she burnt all his worldly possessions.

We were saddened to hear that, after many years of successful operation, one of the subsequent Progress Association managers felt that the quality of bread was not up to standard, so he closed the bakery. Jim had gone to his out-station to live. Maybe it would have been better to employ another European baker on a short-term basis. Anyway, for some time it remained closed.

Morris, one of the Aboriginal members of the bakery staff, had always enjoyed working in the bakery and was quite upset when it closed. Eventually, he persuaded the powers that be that he could ably and responsibly re-open it, which, to his great credit, he did.

At one stage, the Northern Territory Government advertised for tenders for the supply of bread to be used in the government kitchen at Maningrida. Glen read the advertisement which stated that the bread would be supplied at Darwin prices and would be delivered to the kitchen when and how often they required it. With freight costs for flour and other ingredients, it was impossible to bake at Darwin prices and with only one vehicle, which was often in the bush, we could not deliver as they required. Glen, therefore, chose to ignore the advertisement, even though we needed the trade, as he felt we had to do the best for our own organisation. Shortly after a blast came from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs because we had not put in a tender. We, of course, were not a government organisation and could please ourselves. The

public servant who wrote the letter was taken to task by his boss and had to make an apology to Glen. We did eventually supply the bread but on Progress Association terms.

CHAPTER 10

GARDENS AND BUSH TUCKER

At Maningrida for some years prior to 1970, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs was responsible for the running of a fruit and vegetable garden, the produce from which was used to supply the government-run kitchen. This kitchen provided three meals a day for the Aboriginal people on the settlement. Because of government inflexibility, any surplus fruit and vegetables were allowed to rot as they were not allowed to be sold or given away, and if Aboriginal people tried to pick any of this produce, they were in severe trouble.

There were also a number of government-owned lime trees as well as a poultry farm; the lime trees somehow went up in smoke, whilst the fowls became diseased so that, too, was the end of that. In our garden at home were several mango trees. Aboriginal children must have cast-iron stomachs as they used to shin up the trees and eat the fruit while it was still very green. Cashew trees were also dotted around the settlement, and it was surprising to see the nut, with which we were so familiar, coming as an appendage at the base of a green apple-like fruit. In the raw state, the nuts are apparently quite poisonous and are discarded, but the children loved the fruit.

There were many varieties of bush fruits and bush tucker, which have been studied by scientists and dietitians and found to have valuable properties. Ili (rock figs) are good to eat and Corkwood (Kalarimpa) blossoms, when crushed and soaked in water, make a sweet drink. Tjala (honey ants) are delicious and have tremendous food value. Minhalpa (native tobacco) is dried and mixed with ashes from burnt eucalypt bark to make a very popular chewing tobacco; often substituted by Log Cabin pipe tobacco after the demise of plug tobacco. Quandongs or native peach are much enjoyed and Native tomatoes have a nice flavour and are very nutritious. Yams make a satisfactory and nourishing meal but small passion fruits were my favourite. Sugar-bag is also popular and to find this sack of honey was luxury indeed. The seeds in the centre of water lily flowers, their stalks and roots, as well as hearts of cabbage palms were also enjoyed. Kangaroos, goannas and snakes are roasted in coals and

ashes, while witchety grubs can be eaten either cooked or raw and are high in food value.

Aborigines, traditionally, were never tillers of the soil, but the Gunardba people who lived on the banks of the Cadell River, 48 kilometres east of Maningrida, decided they had just the place for their own market garden. With the help of money from the Aboriginal Benefits Trust Fund and the Maningrida Progress Association, Glen soon got that scheme off the ground. Our first horticulturalist cum agriculturalist was none other than the present Labor Federal Minister for Transport and Communications, Senator Bob Collins, who had previously worked with CSIRO in Darwin. He worked like a Trojan and, with the help of the local Aborigines and a small tractor, cleared sizeable trees from along the banks of the lovely Cadell River and surrounding land. They then had the back-breaking task of stick picking until 40 acres of land were cleared and cultivated.

The locals were thrilled and, under Bob's guidance, they enthusiastically started planting the area with Cavendish bananas, watermelons, sweet potatoes, pawpaws, pineapples, mangoes, beans, pumpkins, tomatoes, lettuces and cucumbers. When ripe, they were marketed through the Progress Association store, where our customers were able to enjoy the fruits of the labours of Bob and the Gunardba people.

Bob also travelled to Victoria and purchased gladioli bulbs and corms as well as tuberoses, which all grew extremely well at Cadell. In fact, some blooms were exported to Adelaide and Darwin quite successfully. On completion of the flowering season, the bulbs and corms were lifted, dusted with sulphur and placed in a number of wheat bags, taken to Maningrida and stored in one of the sheds until the appropriate time for replanting. Would you believe it, another member of the staff thought the sulphur was mould and dumped the lot? He rose to be a senior officer in Parks and Wildlife!

John Hunter's main idea, and one Glen readily went along with, was that this and several other ventures of various types should be socio-economic, to try and encourage a degree of economic independence in people who were returning to their traditional land. Without his support and that of Glen and the Progress Association, the viability of these projects would have been questionable as they were able to function without the normal overheads incurred in the course of running a business.

Bob Collins later returned to Darwin and a Tongan gardener, Vainga Veikoso, was employed; as well as being a very keen gardener, he was a very dedicated missionary. After some very successful years of operation, Aboriginal deaths and disputes, the availability of Unemployment Benefits, as well as waning enthusiasm and general lack of interest, caused this project to fold. It is hoped however that, like the bakery, there will perhaps be a resurgence of interest. The Aboriginal Benefits Trust

Fund, in funding a project, had a strange system of incentive; work hard and be successful and you had to pay back the money as a loan, but fail, and it was just written off as a grant.

After fifteen years, Mark recently re-visited Maningrida and was told that the Gundardba gardens were being re-established. He was also delighted at the welcome he received. It was as though he was a member of their family returning home. Actually, he drove a Jeep from Darwin and people initially thought he was the Bush Tucker Man arriving. Geoff visits the Maningrida area with some regularity so, to a degree, we are able to keep in touch with news of the people and events.

CHAPTER 11

ABORIGINAL FISHING PROJECT

John Hunter, as a public servant, and Glen, in private enterprise, worked in close harmony and co-operation, pooling their ideas and working out the best methods, viability and feasibility of any projects put forward by Aboriginal people. At that time, everybody in the community seemed to be fired with zeal and enthusiasm. A number of Aborigines were already employed in Forestry, Council, Health and Education, and Art.

The Fisheries Department of the Northern Territory had operated a fishing project at Maningrida with limited success and it eventually closed. Some of its former Aboriginal employees decided they would like to start their own private Aboriginal fishing operation, so another socio-economic project was born.

Once again with the help of money from the Aboriginal Benefits Trust Fund, five small fishing boats were bought — by this time the Progress Association had its own supply and fishing boat *OH9*. Any fish caught were sold through the Maningrida Progress Association store and the fishermen paid for their catch, whilst all fuel and maintenance costs were borne by that same organisation.

Aboriginal people have mainly hunted and killed for their immediate needs, so it was quite foreign for them to really strain themselves to fish all day for great quantities and, of course, if a dugong or turtle passed by, all else was forgotten in the chase for such a delicacy. Also to be taken into account were the picnics and running their families and friends on innumerable trips along the coast to visit other families and friends. Usually, before bringing in their catch, they made sure their families and friends received their quota. After a few years of successful operation, and as the Progress Association costs rose with so much maintenance being required on both the boats and engines, it was decided to close this venture, even though the seas were teeming with fish of all varieties, such as tuna, barramundi, queen fish, moon fish, Spanish mackerel, red snapper, shark, saw fish, prawns, crayfish, crabs, clams, oysters and many other types of shellfish. In consultation with the community, the fishing boats were then given to individual fishermen on the understanding that all costs were then to be borne by each individual fisherman or family group.

John Hunter also delivered ice boxes along the coast to the fishermen who used to fish at river mouths — the ice kept the catch fresh during the day. This was another socio-economic venture to help those people who had returned to their seaside homelands.

I had read and also heard from some of the older Aboriginal men that, for centuries, each Wet Season, people from Macassar, which is on the southern part of the Indonesian Island of Sulawesi, used to set out under sail from their own homeland to head for the white, sandy beaches of Arnhem Land along Australia's farthest northern coastline. This required considerable navigational skills and seamanship. They were assisted by their praus being borne by the North West Monsoons.

On arrival, they spent the Wet Season diving, gathering, gutting, drying and smoking trepang, also known as beche-de-mer or sea cucumber. Trepang are fat, rough-skinned, greyish sea slugs approximately 10-15 centimetres long and shaped like green cucumbers. With their task completed in the Dry Season, the Macassans would load their praus with this valuable cargo, pay for it by the barter system with rice, metal knives, axes and other goods, and were then sped on their way homeward, assisted by the South East Trade Winds.

Some Aborigines were invited to return with the Macassans for holidays, whilst others joined the crews of pearling luggers which used to ply the northern waters. This link with the Macassans remains in evidence as some words from their language are still in common use. This annual event came to an end in 1907 with a change to the Immigration Policy of the Australian Government. A few remains of Macassan wells are still to be seen along the coast, as are shady tamarind trees which were believed to have been planted by these visitors.

In the mid-70s, the Maningrida Progress Association received a letter from a firm in Singapore, who were well aware of past history and were enquiring about the possibility of re-establishing the trepang industry and supplying the Singapore market with this luxury. As Glen was busy with other projects, it was left to me to see what I could do about the scheme. Firstly, I encouraged some of the coastal-dwelling Aborigines to gather quantities of trepang and, as the Singaporeans had sent processing and cooking instructions, I had the unenviable task of scraping their rough outer skin with a shell, gutting, cooking and smoking them ready to send to Singapore, firstly by Connair to Darwin and then by Qantas to Singapore. Although we had followed instructions to the letter, the finished products were not quite done to their satisfaction. We eventually found out that when they said to cook for a certain length of time, they did not realise our cooking was done on an electric stove instead of over slow-burning coconut husks.

Shortly after, we were holidaying in Singapore so decided on our last day to make the acquaintance of the person with whom we had been corresponding. We had lunch, then Glen, Geoff, Mark and I set off to meet him to ask if he would show us what the finished product should really look like. Trepanng are an absolute delicacy and a treasured luxury used in Chinese cooking and are therefore much sought after. We all piled into his chauffeur-driven Mercedes and off to the dried fish markets we went. This proved to be quite an interesting experience.

On the way back, the driver pulled up at several hotels and restaurants whilst we remained in the car. Eventually, we were all invited to a restaurant which had trepanng on the menu and we were to be the guests of our new acquaintance for lunch; none of us being in need of even a bite of food and least of all, any trepanng. Course after course arrived, shark's fin soup, chicken, pork, shredded jellyfish, sea weed and green tea, and to cap it all, trepanng. My menfolk would not even taste this so-called luxury, and so as not to offend our host who piled it into my bowl, I ate it and hurriedly washed every mouthful down with orange juice. They say trepanng is an acquired taste; personally, I do not ever want even to smell it, let alone taste it again, especially as I was violently ill on-the plane back to Australia that night. Even so, I did appreciate our host's generosity and thoughtfulness.

This Singaporean company sent out Nelson Goh, one of their Chinese representatives, to Maningrida and he was our guest for ten days. He could not believe what he saw in the way of trepanng, fish, crabs, oysters and other seafoods, as he had been used to fishing in the waters around Singapore which had been practically fished out. He went fishing on the *OH9*, the Maningrida Progress Association's supply boat, catching sharks for sharks fin soup, gathering bag after bag of mud crabs as well as catching many other varieties of fish which abound in the coastal rivers and the waters of the Arafura Sea. Glen thought he would take Nelson on one of our supply runs to a remote part of the coast, up the Blyth River and then along a small tributary where they were to unload supplies for the people living in that area. They had seen a number of large crocodiles on the way and Nelson was really scared, so when it was time to unload, he hurriedly jumped out of the boat, missed his footing and landed in the water not far from one of the crocodiles. Glen said that he has never seen anybody move so quickly!

Whilst the potential was there, and still is, the timing was not right for this project. The Singaporean company wanted to commence a joint venture with a Japanese fishing company, but it was at the time Justice Woodward (later of ASIO) was gathering data and information for Land Rights Policies and the protection of rights for the three miles out to sea limits; and for similar reasons to the demise of the fishing industry, there were now easier ways for the local Aborigines to earn a living, such as receiving Social Service cheques and other payments. It was really a pity

to see so much valuable foodstuff going to waste, as Aboriginal people of that area told me that, like me, they dislike and will not eat trepang.

Professor Harry Messel and a team of scientists from the University of Sydney were at Maningrida for some time studying and following the life-cycle and habits of crocodiles in the northern rivers. The crocodiles would be caught and a small transmitter attached to their bodies to check on their movements after they had been released. At about the same time, the Government made crocodile shooting illegal, as it was felt that they were becoming an endangered species. Prior to this, Aboriginal people used to hunt and shoot them, often tying a dead dog to a branch of a tree as bait. Aborigines would also eat the crocodile flesh and the skins would be salted down to preserve them. They were then brought into the store where we packed them and sent them to Darwin for export overseas. The longest skin we handled was 6.5 metres. We were just making arrangements for exporting to France, but because of this change in Government policy and regulations, that venture did not get off the ground, although Aborigines were still able to shoot crocodiles or any other animals for food. Because of the policy change, the eating of crocodile eggs was discouraged. As extremely high prices were still available overseas for crocodile skins, some areas of the Northern Territory had to be under constant surveillance to prevent any illegal hunting of these reptiles.

One day, whilst talking with Harry Messel, I mentioned I had heard American Indians were getting television in remote areas of their country, and wondered if, in fact, he thought it would ever be a possibility in remote areas of Australia. He thought, in the long term, this might be so. Now, 15 years later, in many places it has for some time been a reality — Imparja is an Aboriginal television station in Alice Springs, and CAAMA, an Aboriginal radio station, also operates from there. The ABC and a commercial station also transmit their own programs from Darwin. Most Aboriginal people really enjoy seeing and listening to many of their own programs and learning much about their own and European cultures as well. The women told me they even enjoy programs like *Neighbours* and *The Flying Doctors*. Although a number of the older generation enjoy television, some say they worry about the detrimental effect it has on their own culture.

Isolation has its problems, particularly because of the security needs of the unprotected coast. The north coast of Australia was then constantly patrolled by the *Assail* and the *Assault*, two Royal Australian Navy patrol boats, which would sometimes call at Maningrida. Later, air surveillance was carried out along the farthest coast by Nomad aircraft, but with such an enormously long and mainly uninhabited coastline, it must be well nigh impossible to detect all illegal callers and contraband that reach our shores.

CHAPTER 12

IN THE BUSH

Prior to the Maningrida Progress Association owning a vehicle, John Hunter, and occasionally Bob Cross, who owned a small Jeep, would invite us to go with them to some of the distant beaches, crossing country where no roads had ever been. At times, as I stood in certain spots, there was a great feeling of incredulity, realising that perhaps, because of the previous inaccessibility, I may well have been the first white woman to have ever set foot in some of these remote areas.

Our family was really very privileged indeed as the local Aboriginal people had seen that we were, in fact, working with them and for them, and achieving good results in a reasonable time. As a result, we were given open invitations to visit all the areas out from Maningrida; but, out of courtesy, we would formally seek permission from the land owners just in case a ceremony was in progress. At times, we would be escorted with great dignity and pride by some of these people to their various homelands and told much of the past history of the area.

The Stone Country, approximately 45 kilometres south of Maningrida, was inaccessible during the Wet. Some of the Aborigines who had remained there in isolation for that period, would set out as the river levels lowered, mainly to collect supplies of ammunition and tobacco and to leave food orders which would be delivered when it was possible to cross the rivers by vehicle. It was interesting to see families on the move, wading across arm-pit-high water, balancing some of their worldly possessions on their heads, their axes tucked firmly under their chins, in a manner which defies description. Others had babies in arms and some carried children on their shoulders.

On our occasional days off, if not picking up loads of watermelons, sweet potatoes or other produce from the gardens at Cadell, we would, after seeking permission, head off to the Stone Country, where the scenery was truly magnificent. We were also able to view wonderful cave paintings, visit cave armouries where the designs for stone spear and axe heads were created and later fashioned, see log coffins containing the remains of some of their ancestors, which had been placed in caves or between rocks for

shelter. Generally, people living in the Stone Country had had less contact with Europeans and were quite shy. Many were wonderful artists.

How fortunate we were to have been afforded these opportunities to visit such hallowed areas and to call at some lovely billabongs on the way, where exquisitely beautiful water lilies of every shade abounded. The long-necked turtles loved that area, too. Seeing a tree snake slithering down the trunk of a tree was the only discordant note in this sublime paradise, as a chill would run down my spine, reminding me that this, too, was a natural habitat of such venomous snakes as the King Brown, Taipan and Death Adder.

In the Dry Season, the bush was spectacular and particularly beautiful with golden wattles, orange grevilleas and what locally was called bush heather or Morrison bush — quite a sizeable shrub with masses of small, pale lilac-coloured daisy-like flowers. Low to the ground, too, were myriads of delightful plants and flowers and small shrubs in an enormous range of colours and varieties. Many *Melaleuca* trees, which are commonly called paper bark trees, grew in the area and could be a great source of water in an emergency. The bark, too, was used for all manner of purposes, one of which was to fashion containers for the carrying of water. The *Pandanus* palms were a lovely sight in the areas along river banks and swamps and were most useful for weaving. Their orange nuts were incredibly hard to crack, but well worth the effort, as their kernels were sweet and delicious.

At Navy Landing and Juda Point were wonderful stretches of white, sandy beach where one could drive kilometre after kilometre whilst the tide was out, for the range between high and low tide is very great. In the same direction also was Animyra Creek, but one always had to be very conscious of the movement of the tide and of the crocodiles, whose footprints we sometimes followed. As soon as the tide turned, the sea rushed in with great and forceful haste; the power of the water and its salt content would ruin any vehicle unfortunate enough to be caught in its path. This did not happen to us, but it had done so in the past to others and I guess it could happen again.

Rocky Point and Crab Creek were both popular picnic spots, and whilst there, to catch sight of a sea eagle's eyrie in the high branches of a dead tree was also an interesting sight. An outing to Barney's Jungle, a rain forest area, was a welcome and refreshing change on a hot day. Creepers entwined everything in their path, whilst the ferns and tree orchids added to the charm of this area. Sometimes, we would load up the vehicle with Mark's and Geoff's friends and head off to Tomkinson's Hole for a swim in its safe waters.

The old Oenpelli road in the direction of the Stone Country, but in a much drier area, had its own beauty where the cotton and corkwood trees grew

and the black cockatoos seemed to call it home; these birds are magnificent with their shiny black feathered bodies and tail feathers of a red and black combination.

On the flood plains, there is a spot locally known as Brown's bog, named after John Hunter's Aboriginal driver, Michael Brown, who was unceremoniously and hopelessly bogged there for days. In this black, muddy area and its surrounds were some fantastic ant hills, two to three or more metres high. They were dark grey and jagged, looking to me as though there had once been a gigantic terrestrial explosion and these were giant pieces of shrapnel which had fallen to earth from outer space.

In other areas were many tall, cathedral-type termite nests, and smaller ones which looked as though they were constructed of iron filings, and others of bauxite. At times one could not be blamed for thinking they had come across an ancient cemetery with hundreds of similar-sized ant hills looking like tombstones peeping out through the grass. Each type, in its own way, made a unique and interesting part of the landscape. I used to get really annoyed to see some Europeans blatantly knock them down just for the fun of it. These ants had worked so hard for many years to construct their homes, yet insensitive white people could knock them down in seconds. I am sure ants must have their own territorial rights, as where a road had been established over ant nests, these have been rebuilt in the original position, even if in the centre of the new road.

Another highlight was a trip to Haul Round, the sandy atoll 13 kilometres off shore, where we saw practically the whole area covered in a green creeper with purple bell-shaped flowers. These plants, in turn, because we visited it in the breeding season, were protecting thousands and thousands of tern eggs which had been laid in scrapes in the sand. Above, myriads of terns were flying like a giant revolving canopy, casting a protective shadow over the whole atoll. It was a marvellously fascinating sight and would have been an ornithologist's dream. Sometimes, on the way home from Haul Round, sailing through fairly heavy seas, we would spot a large green turtle gallantly breasting the waves. Occasionally we would call and collect oysters off some rocks. The collecting was interesting, but I let others enjoy the eating.

A walk to the old jetty through the tall elephant grass, which at times grew to a height of two to three metres, was quite an adventure. I also enjoyed exploring the mangrove swamps, although at times it was an eerie experience and I had the feeling that I might be confronted by a pirate at any time. The small mud skippers abounded and were fascinating to watch as they are amphibious and can walk on the sand as well as swim in the sea. The platoons of soldier crabs along the beaches were also an interesting spectacle, as they, with great precision, foraged for their food before the onset of the incoming tide. At times, we would meet with some

of the locals, and the children loved to show us how to dig up small fish out of a seemingly dried out, muddy area.

A trip to the Tomkinson River by boat was always enjoyed. There was a friendly crocodile about two to three metres long there. As it heard the boat approaching, it would swim towards us as though it sensed I had a tasty morsel for its lunch. I placed this on a fish wire, always bearing in mind I myself did not want to be its lunch.

Once when my sister was visiting, John Hunter asked if she and I would like to fly to Bulman, an Aboriginal cattle station, 150 kilometres south of Maningrida. We had two minutes to get ready and had a wonderful day.

I seem to have spent a great deal of my life waiting at airports, in the air, caught in rocky or sandy river beds, or bogged in horrendous sand and mud. Later, some of the worst bogs were straddled by corduroys made of saplings lashed together with wire. These proved to be a great boon. We were not just foolhardy pleasure seekers, but travelled of necessity as part of our job.

I must pay tribute to the manufacturers of Toyota four-wheel drive vehicles. I doubt if in Japan they would ever have been able to find or simulate such rugged terrain in which to test-drive their vehicles. I would think that snow and high mountains would be about the only hazards not encountered in the Northern Territory. As an added bonus, there were buffalo wallows, half to one metre or so deep and long enough for a buffalo to luxuriate in his squelching mud bath. These wallows were enough to test any vehicle, especially on a cross-country run with no roads in sight. Thankfully, Toyotas were real work horses and fantastic performers under such harsh conditions, and, with their reliability, one was always reasonably confident of getting safely back home, though it was always wise to advise somebody of any travel plans in the bush, just in case. I only wish the vehicles had been equipped with air-conditioners instead of the heaters which were already installed — not quite what was needed in the tropics! The installation of modern radios would also have been appreciated.

The Toyota four-wheel drive vehicles would, I am sure, have to be one of the ultimate and most prized possessions of both European and Aboriginal people in the bush. Their mobility and outstanding performance have brought about an enormous change of lifestyle, particularly for Aborigines. Instead of having to walk as in the past, those lucky enough to own or borrow such a vehicle are now inveterate travellers of a different kind. With their families and friends, they pile aboard, traversing long distances as well as covering large areas of the country at will, visiting other family members, going fishing, hunting, food and wood gathering and shopping, attending ceremonies, meetings, church functions, concerts, music and art festivals, as well as sporting activities. Most Aborigines

possess great bush skills which are apparently handed down from generation to generation. They, too are generally excellent bush mechanics, seemingly able to perform miracles with a nail, a piece of string or wire, though sometimes, optimistically, they set off with little fuel, oil, water, no spare tube, tyre or pump.

Before arriving in the Northern Territory, I had not notched up many flying hours as a passenger, but could recall flights in a Dragon Rapide, Avro Anson and Lockheed Electra. Over the years, especially in the Northern Territory and mainly of necessity, I have been on many flights in a variety of aircraft ranging from single-engined planes to Jumbo Jets. Some of the smaller planes appeared to be of doubtful origin and performance. Even though, in some instances, I have stepped aboard with great trepidation, I have tried to allay my fears with the philosophy that the pilot really wanted to reach his destination safely, so why should I worry. I must admit at times, especially in the Wet Season, I did have grave doubts when flying through blinding rain, hitting enormous air pockets and being buffeted about like a cork cast on a mountainous sea of clouds. These clouds ranged in colour from white to black, and at times were enlivened with vivid flashes of lightning. On other occasions, to see the shadow of our plane cradled in the centre of a full circle rainbow, silhouetted against a back-drop of fleecy white clouds, was just such an awesome sight I felt absolutely calm and at peace with the world. In the very early days of Jabiru, we made an unscheduled landing to pick up a piece of wire needed for running repairs to hold together one of the plane's wings.

On one occasion, I was delayed in Darwin, as the airstrip at Maningrida was closed for more than a week because of bad weather. Over the years the Darwin airport had been up-graded several times and even then was grossly inadequate, especially as an International Terminal, but recently a very modern new terminal has been opened. Once, it was Glen's and my misfortune to arrive on an international flight, only to find another Jumbo Jet had preceded us by a few minutes and was already on the tarmac. The mad scramble for luggage and the subsequent interminable delays checking through Customs were the last thing needed at 5.00 o'clock in the morning, especially after a long flight. Eventually, Glen approached the Immigration Officer and handed over his passport, which the officer began to peruse. He then looked up and said, 'Ah! You're the man I have been searching for all the morning'. Taken aback, Glen asked why. The officer, with a wicked grin, handed back his passport and said, 'Not to worry, sir, you just happen to be the last person in the queue'. What a relief!

CHAPTER 13

MOVING HOUSE AND VISITORS

We were living in a Department of Aboriginal Affairs house and were only permitted to do so until finance was available from the Maningrida Progress Association to build its own; our days of living at the foreshore were numbered. A block of land had been allocated to the Maningrida Progress Association and a contract was signed with builders from Goulburn Island for its erection. The timber was to come from the saw mill at Elcho Island. The people at Goulburn Island were unable to fulfil this contract, so once again Bob Cross' expertise was called upon. The timber was transported by the Mission boat, the *Warrawee*, which was for various reasons not able to berth at the barge landing so had to be unloaded at sea and the timber floated ashore on the in-coming tide. When completed, it was a very comfortable home with plenty of modern conveniences, and timber panelling in the lounge and dining room, but I was really sad to leave the seafront.

We were to entertain a many and varied collection of people over the years, especially as John Hunter, the Superintendent, and John Wilders, his assistant, were both bachelors. We really enjoyed the contact with the outside world as, with the increases in the number of Progress Association staff, we found it prudent, in such an isolated community, to keep fairly much to ourselves socially to avoid any staff friction. Actually, our working lives were so full that there really was little time for socialising anyway.

There were visiting politicians, both State and Federal, international mining executives, diplomats, television personalities, judges, lawyers, business consultants, architects, scientists and other academics, and international parliamentary delegations, to name but a few. Maningrida was a particularly lovely spot to be in the Dry Season — far more pleasant than the chill of a Canberra winter.

At one time, we had a visiting Member of Parliament from Canberra staying with us, so I invited one of the leading Aborigines and his wife to dinner. Barramundi was on the menu and, thankfully, there were other choices of food because, unbeknown to me, the lady's totem happened to

be the barramundi and it was impossible for her to eat or think of eating that particular variety of fish.

When entertaining, I was extremely fortunate as Jim at the bakery allowed me to use his oven for some of my cooking, especially whole, large barramundi, which would never have fitted into a normal household oven. The fish were done to perfection with the slow heat after the day's bread had been baked. Actually, I was a pretty fair cook when I arrived, although I had little knowledge of many recipes involving seafoods, but was soon to learn. I would never be tempted, however, to try the raw, brown, seemingly endless strings of worms the Aborigines slurped down like spaghetti. Despite the isolation and conditions, I often made use of my best cutlery, china, silverware and crystal to remind me of city life.

One day John Hunter asked me if I would mind putting up the Ecuadorian Ambassador to Uruguay, who would be staying overnight; his travelling companion would be staying elsewhere. That was fine until we discovered the Ambassador spoke only Spanish and the other person was his interpreter; so two beds were made up for that night. I hurriedly scanned through my cookery books for recipes with a Spanish accent and flavour, and I am glad to say my guests were delighted with the results. They had been travelling the world for some weeks on United Nations' business, enquiring into the problems of indigenous minorities in various countries and often had not been able to find foods to their liking.

When Sir Paul Hasluck was Governor-General, he also stayed overnight at Maningrida, but not with us, as such an august personage had to be housed with the strictest of security; but, we did enjoy the informal dinner held in his honour. We had his pilot stay with us and, early next morning, were invited to look over the VIP aircraft. Mark was particularly pleased when the Governor-General went out of his way to have a chat with him.

One of the most memorable occasions was the visit of the Prime Minister, Mr Gough Whitlam, his wife Margaret and daughter, Senators Moss Cass and Cavenagh, Sir Lennox Hewitt, Allen O'Brien, the Northern Territory Administrator, and members and staff of the Prime Minister's Department in Canberra, who had come for a meeting with the Aboriginal Elders. The VIP plane touched down just before lunch. Glen and I were the only local Europeans invited as guests to the luncheon in their honour. This was catered for by the community and held in the shade of the coconut palms along the foreshore, and was a very informal affair; the Prime Minister pulled up his chair next to mine and we chatted away. He told me he had been a navigator in the RAAF in World War II, and his squadron had been stationed at Milingimbi, about 150 kilometres along the coast east of Maningrida, and how, during that time, he had come to know and respect Aboriginal people and their culture. Everybody talked freely and had a great time.

I was not invited to the meeting to be held after lunch in the grounds of the manse nearby, where Mossesse Latu, the Tongan minister, had erected a palm shelter. Mrs Whitlam, however, said she would be going and urged me to attend with her. I am glad I did; the Aboriginal people had realised and were excited about the fact that at last, face to face, they could put forward and discuss important matters with real live politicians instead of unknown faces in Canberra with whom they had been corresponding for years. No holds were barred and it became a very volatile meeting; the Aborigines had their say, especially making the point that they wanted more voice in the running of their own affairs. Lee Pinder, an activist for women's rights, who was originally from the Philippines, also had her say. Then John Hunter, who had worked tirelessly for Aboriginal people, absolutely exploded when Senator Cavenagh said, 'Just put it all in writing'. Hadn't they already unsuccessfully gone through all that humbug for years and years? John said exactly what he thought and the bureaucrats from Canberra were muttering between themselves, asking who was this public servant who dared to question the Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs with such fervour, and called for his sacking. I was feeling devastated because John had in fact been one of the most dedicated, loyal and hard-working Europeans genuinely trying to improve the lot of the Aborigines and was truly frustrated by the call for the same old story of putting it all in writing. When the meeting closed, Glen and I were talking to Senator Moss Cass about the gravity of the situation. We gave John's side of the story and explained how we actually saw the situation as one of utter frustration for Aboriginal people and for those trying to help their cause. The Prime Minister, too, had been very perceptive in assessing the overall scene and the reason for John's outburst. At the airport as we were saying good-bye, we were assured that the Prime Minister would personally see that the sacking did not take place.

Some weeks later visiting mining executives arrived, and we were telling them of our visitors. We had to smile as they said that each time they had to visit Sir Lennox Hewitt in his office, they would have to brace themselves after shuddering and trembling at his door; we found him to be a charming grandfatherly figure. Later, as Chief of Qantas, he was to be of great assistance to me, personally, when I had problems with that airline.

John Hunter realised that there was never to be Aboriginal advancement and employment opportunities with so many European public servants in the work force, some of whom were in relatively unimportant positions. After repeated requests to the Department of Aboriginal Affairs for a reduction in the number of white staff were ignored, he took the calculated action of standing down all his European staff. He, of course, did not have the power to do this, but wanted to highlight the need for change. The reaction of his superiors, who flew out to Maningrida, was to immediately reinstate all these people. As soon as the hierarchy left for Darwin John repeated his action. This time, he was transferred to Darwin Office. John's

removal upset the Aboriginal people greatly. They chartered a 15-passenger Heron aircraft and went to the office of the Director of Aboriginal Affairs and staged a 'sit-in', calling for John's reinstatement as Superintendent at Maningrida. Eventually, their wishes were acceded to and he returned and was met at the airport with a hero's welcome and, with an Aboriginal guard of honour, they marched him back to the Council Office. Some time later he joined the Northern Land Council for a short period, but afterwards decided to return south and work on his oyster farm and rural property.

Personally, I think it should be mandatory for all public servants or people in authority in quasi-Statutory Bodies dealing in Aboriginal affairs, to serve several months in a community. This also goes for Ministers of Aboriginal Affairs, as nobody, unless they have lived in a community, can possibly appreciate what life is like; one needs to experience the reality of the situation. I am sure that in some instances there would be a less bureaucratic approach to the many problems facing communities. At times you can reach the highest of highs, and in the next second, be brought down to earth with the greatest of thuds.

Many frustrations also exist with the non-performance of suppliers and services from various sections of the European community. Most so-called experts in Aboriginal affairs seemed to be people who would make whistlestop tours and write copious notes and papers about same. After twenty years, I keep finding just how little I really know, and how much is still to be learnt.

At closing time at the store one day, a barefooted, bedraggled Rolf Harris arrived at Maningrida. He had just spent several weeks out in the bush with Aboriginal friends, living on bush tucker. He was so excited at seeing European food again, especially when offered some ice-cream, that he threw his arms around me and gave me a great hug and kiss. Later that evening, he helped serve in the take-away, and the following evening, put on a two-hour impromptu concert for us all — Aborigines and Europeans. Because of the energy he expended, his shirt was like a wet rag, but I am sure, with the rousing ovation he received, he must have thought it was well worth the effort. He also painted one of his famous pictures, which still hangs in the restaurant of the Hasty Tasty.

Another visitor to spend a few days with us was Gordon Sweeney, a former member of the staff of the Native Affairs Department and also an early agriculturalist with the Methodist Overseas Mission.

Most of our visitors and business contacts arrived by charter planes, which meant numbers of pilots had to be catered for. Most were pleasant enough but a few considered themselves to be more important than the VIPs themselves.

During our time at Maningrida and perhaps because of our more mature years, we were sometimes called upon by both Aborigines and Europeans to be a guide, philosopher and friend — marital problems being the main source of trouble. Something which seemed to lack common sense was that school teachers worked together all day and then went home to live next door to each other in their spare time; the same with health and police. From a practical point, I can see their reasoning, but it seemed to me that it would have been far more desirable for them to be separated and would have lessened the possibility of cliques forming, especially in the pre-Wet Season, when, because of the extreme humidity, there was a great deal of tension and people's nerves were frayed almost to breaking point.

Almost as soon as children could talk they would call me Jean, and more often than not, their cheery greeting would be, 'Hi Jean'. With my warped sense of humour, I always pictured gallons of disinfectant being flushed down smelly toilets by the hygiene officers, of which I was not one — thank goodness! As a child, my nickname was Jackie, which I am sure would have been more appropriate as, at Maningrida, I often had to fix up small plumbing and electrical problems and in general was a Jack of all trades and maybe master of none.

CHAPTER 14

HOUSING AND OTHER BUILDING PROJECTS

The Aboriginal housing at Maningrida was appalling and most inadequate. Up to the time of our arrival, there had been only a few basic houses with very few elementary facilities. The Aborigines expressed a desire for better housing, so Glen applied for money to try to improve things in this area. In 1970, he received a grant of \$900,000 to start the first Aboriginal Housing Association in the Northern Territory. A number of prototypes were built until the local people were satisfied with plans which they thought suited their particular needs. Because of the pressure of other projects and not having the necessary building expertise, and also because Bob Cross had more than enough on his hands, Glen advertised for a Housing Manager, and Rod Seymour was appointed.

Before the establishment of the Maningrida Housing Association, cement bricks were manufactured by Aborigines in the community, under the guidance of Bob Cross. Bob sent samples of these bricks to Darwin to make sure they conformed to the proper standards required by the Northern Territory building regulations. These bricks were used for housing and other constructions in the community.

A great deal of money has been spent on consultants and architects to try and design a reasonably-priced style of home suitable for the Aboriginal lifestyle. Most Aborigines preferred to sleep out under the stars, but they at the same time needed protection during the Wet Season. Now, more people seem to be sleeping indoors, so adequate bathroom and toilet facilities are necessary: public toilets are a disaster.

Some Aborigines now purchase beds, mattresses, furniture and air conditioners, so their mode of living is gradually changing. Aboriginal culture demands that, with the death of a person living in a house or dwelling, these must be vacated for some weeks or months.

Vandalism was rife. I often envisaged for the bush areas a strong, prefabricated, bush green, insulated, igloo-type house, with a sliding roof, roller door and eye-level unbreakable perspex windows, where the whole family could sleep and the roof be adjusted according to the weather, with smaller igloos for toilet, bathroom and kitchen facilities. Maintenance

would be minimal, with less bits and pieces to be vandalised. I am sure that this type of home would be more comfortable and a lot cheaper and easier to erect and maintain.

A Town Hall was built at Maningrida in 1972, with the Progress Association donating \$30,000 of the \$60,000 required to erect a cyclone-proof building which could be used by all; in any emergency, the people could be safely housed there. Bob Cross and his building team did a marvellous job on this project.

For the Town Hall I bought curtains and chairs and, at the same time, ordered furniture for the restaurant at the Hasty Tasty. The Hasty Tasty decor was terracotta Spanish-patterned vinyl-tiled floor, white walls, black-framed teak tables, orange curtains, with, as previously mentioned, Rolf Harris' orange and black painting adorning one wall, and Aboriginal artefacts such as fish traps and spears were displayed on the other walls.

CHAPTER 15

OUT-STATIONS

To Aborigines, land is above all else; it caters for their spiritual, cultural and bodily needs. When, in 1976, Land Rights were proclaimed and Self-Determination encouraged, many Aborigines turned their backs on the bright lights of the settlement to return to their homelands, often giving up good jobs and better housing and returning to perhaps a humpy, but it was their homeland and that was all that mattered. It was then that the Out-station Movement was really born in the Maningrida area. People choosing to return were sometimes helped with limited government monetary assistance for basic housing, a few were supplied with a vehicle for easier access to shopping and health services, and later, two-way radios were installed. In our time, seventeen out-stations were being serviced by the Maningrida Progress Association. On these out-stations, Aborigines hoped to gain more freedom and autonomy, and were able to hunt, forage, and make their own decisions as well as pursue their more traditional lifestyle away from the prying eyes or interference of other Aboriginal groups or Europeans. Some say they are now much healthier and happier.

The Maningrida Progress Association assisted a great deal with the Out-station Movement by building and opening four small bush stores, managed by young Aboriginal women, to help people survive in their own communities. With the improvement in health facilities and the availability of more nutritious foods, the life expectancy of Aboriginal people increased and, thankfully, there was a decrease in the infant mortality rate. This meant there were more people returning to live in homeland areas, but the land was unable to sustain the increased population. The Maningrida Progress Association then acted as a support group. We supplemented the locally available foods such as fish, game and bush tucker. Out-station stores were built at Cadell, Jimarda, Garmedi and Mormega, and Department of Social Services cheques were taken to these out-stations to be signed and changed, after which, people could select and pay for their own goods from the store. In other out-stations without stores, goods would usually be sold from the truck.

I had enjoyed the film classic, *The African Queen*, and often wished I could have a similar real-life adventure as portrayed by Katherine

Hepburn, who made a perilous and epic journey along the tropical rivers of Africa, doing her bit for the British war effort. My father had lived in Africa for twelve years, which I am sure also fired my imagination and increased my fascination. Little did I realise that, with the formation of the Outstation Movement at Maningrida, I would be able to fulfil, to a degree, my dream — not, of course, in Africa and not with hostile enemies on the river banks, but in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, aboard the Progress Associations six-metre supply boat, the *OH9*. In this supply boat we plied the murky, tropical tidal rivers during the Wet, changing Social Service cheques, buying artefacts and supplying vital food and necessities to Aboriginal people cut off by impassable roads and swollen rivers.

The outboard motor was, to say the least, temperamental on one particular five-hour journey upstream while travelling on the in-coming tide. The return trip, under normal circumstances, may have taken a little less time with our load being lightened. If we were late and lucky enough to travel home on the out-going tide, this would take an even shorter time. The boat was ably skippered by Jim Pickersgill, one of the Progress Association's employees, and I was the crew.

Our journey commenced in the early light of dawn by travelling up the Liverpool River. It was a fascinating trip, with the black, and the sulphur-crested cockatoos screeching overhead. Also there were brolgas, white egrets, jabirus, and magpie geese out on their day's hunting, as were at times some Burdekin ducks.

The crocodiles slid into the murky waters to thrash about and then clamber back onto the muddy river banks. Fish kept popping up out of the water and enormous jelly fish cruised by. The river banks and beyond were densely covered with tropical undergrowth and the trees were entwined with tropical creepers.

Our first stop was at Mormega on the Mann River, which is a tributary of the Liverpool River. There we conducted our business, unloading the drums of flour, cartons of sugar and tea, tins of powdered milk, bullets and other goods. This was no easy task as masses of black, squelching mud had to be negotiated, but our customers were very patient during the unloading process. I would then change their cheques, after which they started their shopping. Bullets for their guns were a necessity as there was so much wild life in the area; and, because the river was teeming with fish, it was unnecessary to take tinned supplies of either of these commodities. Generally, boomerangs are not used in the Top End because of the taller trees and density of the bush; woomeras and spears are far more suitable.

I would purchase bark paintings, weaving and other handicrafts, have a chat with some of the locals and perhaps be shown a new litter of pups. After reloading, we proceeded several kilometres back to the Liverpool River and pulled in at Marakalidben. If the boat broke down on the way

and we were late, there were many problems because of the squelching mud on the steep river bank, which virtually had to be climbed sideways to prevent losing one's footing and finishing up in the uninviting waters of the river below or injuring oneself by a fall into the moored boat. This mud felt to me as if it had the same properties as quicksand, and that one could be sucked into the bowels of the earth at any time.

The same cheque-changing and selling procedures took place, followed by the purchase of artefacts which had to be carefully wrapped and protected from either a heavy shower of rain or spray from the boat as it sped along. Because of the high humidity, the artefacts had to be fairly loosely wrapped to protect the art work from any condensation forming beneath the wrappings and spoiling this valuable cargo. After reloading, we would head off home. These were long, tiring but exciting and adventurous days spent on our epic journeys, but also very satisfying to feel in some small way we were assisting the people of these two such isolated areas. For this job, I was classified as a hawker and had to be finger-printed by the police.

For some years, because of inaccessibility, we were unable to reach the Blyth River. Eventually, the Forestry Department put through a road. It was in an area of low grade bauxite, so the road and surrounding countryside took on an orange-red hue. Many unusual palms were to be found in the bushland along the way and also at Garmedi, where Nellie Melbaya was successfully running her bush store.

During the week, Glen and I generally took it in turns to go out bush whilst the other saw to the day-to-day operations of the Progress Association. The Blyth River at Garmedi was a wide and very deep stream and I did enjoy any and every opportunity offered me to visit the area. To some of the great artists, such as Johnnie Bulun Bulun, this was home.

At Nellie's shop a stocktake would be done, money counted and fresh supplies unloaded. We would then have a general look at the area and chat with the locals and be on our way again. Several times a boat was lowered into the Cadell River a few kilometres downstream from the Gunardba gardens, as the river bank there was too steep for boarding the boat. We then travelled along the Cadell River to its confluence with the Blyth River, travelling some kilometres along this river to Kopanga, at the mouth of the Blyth River, to deliver stores, as there was no shop in that area.

On one of these trips, we said, 'Hello' to one of the last of a line of dug-out canoe makers, who was actually working on one at the time. I said I would like to have a model about one metre long to take south with me when we eventually left Maningrida. He agreed to make one. Some weeks later, he told me to go to a certain spot along the Blythe River as he had found a suitable tree which he had felled with an axe. Glen and I duly went to the

appointed place to find the hollowing-out process was under way, and I could hardly believe my eyes as the maker had thought I meant one metre wide instead of long. When completed, I was the proud owner of a three-metre canoe. He was duly paid and all were very happy.

Often, we would go and collect the fish from the ice boxes along the coast, weighing them in woven dilly bags on one of those small expanding-type scales; all so different from the life of a city dweller. Bamboo Creek was a place where the locals were proud to show us how they were endeavouring to grow sweet potatoes. At Gadji, we saw some of my favourite flowers, the beautiful pink lotus, growing on their tropical river. Before our time, peanut growing had been tried in that area. A shop was built at the Gunardba gardens site and was successfully run.

Bob Cross, in consultation with the local Aborigines, built a bush store at Jimarda which was and still is a source of controversy as the site chosen has been argued about for years. Apart from that, it has proved a boon for these people who previously had to go by boat around the coast and open sea to Kopanga to collect their supplies. The bush store at Jimarda was run by Lily, one of the former shop assistants at Maningrida. During the Wet, this area was virtually inaccessible; occasionally a light plane could land on the airstrip built by the local Aborigines, who had worked hard felling and removing trees and stumps. During the Dry Season, it was another adventurous trip to go there, following bush tracks, driving across country and through reed beds while trying to avoid buffalo wallows. On arrival, I felt as though I had stepped back in time and that Captain Cook might appear on the horizon at any minute. The cycads and, in fact the whole scene, seemed to belong to generations long since departed. The local people still had to dig in the sand for drinking water, used a large baler shell to scoop out the water and as a drinking vessel; it was truly an amazing experience.

It was at Jimarda that Geoff lived for more than a year whilst undertaking anthropological field work.

CHAPTER 16

INTRODUCTION OF POLICE FORCE AT MANINGRIDA

We had lived at Maningrida for several years before a Police Station was authorised. Some nervous Europeans used to sleep with a gun under their beds. Surely, if they felt so threatened and insecure, they should never have lived in such an environment.

Locally, it was thought that the police presence would take a low profile and that, when needed, they would spring into action. Instead, they took a very heavy-handed approach. Many charges were laid against people for the most trivial offences by some very over-zealous, often racist, police officers, which made life unbearable. It was as though Big Brother was looking over your shoulder at all times. I visited Russia and other Communist countries before Glasnost and Perestroika and never felt in any way under such scrutiny as at Maningrida.

On several occasions, ridiculous charges were laid against Glen and the Maningrida Progress Association, only to be thrown out by the Courts. On one occasion, we even employed a QC, much to the annoyance of the police, as they did not appreciate their confrontation with 'The Heavies'. This occasion, in 1973, was when the police confiscated the Maningrida Progress Association's supply and fishing boat, the *OH9*, because it was in a particular area, and although not fishing, had a folded net on board. Here we were trying to get a fishing industry going and the police confiscated the boat, stating it would never be returned. Contact was made with the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in Canberra, who got in touch with the Crown Law Office, and both gave their support. The police lost the case, had to return the boat, pay the substantial costs, and make a formal apology to the Maningrida Progress Association.

One of the Aboriginal members of the Progress Association Board asked Glen for the loan of the store vehicle for an hour or so. Glen asked if he had a driver's licence and he said, 'Yes', and off he went. Shortly after, he was picked up by the police, who checked his licence, which had unfortunately expired the week before. Glen was duly charged with unlawfully letting an unlicensed driver have the loan of a vehicle. Once

again, the police failed in Court because, as a Board member, Jim was Glen's superior, so there was no case to answer.

Geoff and Mark, whilst out on a motor bike ride, skidded in the sand, which is a very easy thing to do in the Maningrida area. Geoff burnt his leg on the exhaust pipe and had some gravel rash on his shoulder. At the clinic, they put on some fairly large dressings. Two days later, the police arrived at our door charging Geoff with not reporting an accident within 24 hours. The Court ruled that there was no accident and, once again, the police were frustrated. The police were rather secretive about the fact that, a short time later, they themselves skidded in the sand and rolled the police vehicle.

Many Aboriginal people were charged for very minor offences. Often they did not even understand what the charge was about and, when questioned, would say yes when, in fact, the true answer should have been no. The police presence, unfortunately, created many tensions which did not exist prior to their arrival.

A number of Aborigines have been trained and employed as Police Aides or Trackers, and are doing a worthwhile job. Aboriginal Legal Aid has assisted many Aborigines who have been in trouble with or have had problems with the law. Glen, as a much respected and law-abiding citizen, was appointed a Justice of the Peace.

CHAPTER 17

FLOUR, SUGAR AND TEA

Aboriginal customers, whether shopping at their community store or the outstations, clearly had their priorities of purchase with tea, sugar and flour being the most sought after commodities. Since these basic food items were introduced into Australia, they gradually became very important and in many ways have greatly influenced the lives of many of Australia's indigenous population. Tea, sugar and flour were at first considered luxuries, but later became regarded as necessities. People living in bush areas came to rely on these products as essential supplements to the sometimes meagre resources of wildlife and bush tucker available to them, especially in times of flood and drought. Many people left their homelands to be nearer the sources of supply of these commodities. Their migration acted as a catalyst for much social, cultural, political and economic change.

The formation of Aboriginal communities, cattle stations and outstations, the building of roads and airstrips, as well as mining exploration, tourism and the clearing of land by the Forestry Department, have all contributed to the disappearance of much wildlife and bush tucker, as has the introduction of cattle, horses, camels, buffaloes, donkeys, foxes, goats and rabbits, and the escalation in the number of feral cats, dogs and pigs, have all taken their toll. The introduction of motor vehicles and firearms to these areas has made for more effective hunting than previously could be done with a spear and woomera, nulla nulla or boomerang, and has been responsible for hastening the depletion of wildlife in some areas, whilst non-Aboriginal buffalo shooters, crocodile hunters and fishermen making incursions into localised waters for their catches, can also take their share of the blame.

Tea, sugar and flour were handed out as rations by government agencies, missions and cattle stations. There has been a long history of Aboriginal exploitation. Some employers used these goods as wages for labour. At times, further exploitation occurred when store managers, roadhouse operators, hawkers and station owners charged exorbitant prices for these goods. Unscrupulous collectors of artefacts offered tea, sugar and flour and maybe some tobacco in exchange for valuable artefacts and important information. A similar method was used by these collectors to gain

ownership of sacred objects. Offers of food must have been very tempting and hard to resist if people were hungry.

These commodities were often shared amongst family members and friends, and were used as gifts at ceremonies, as well as for paybacks at the time of a death. They were also used for the settlement of gambling debts.

The availability of processed flour must have been welcomed by Aboriginal women, who had in the past, gathered seeds and nuts and ground them to the consistency of flour for their use. A popular bush meal consists of damper, which is made by mixing flour, baking powder, salt and water to a dough, which is then flattened and cooked in hot ashes. A bush turkey, large fish, kangaroo, snake or goanna roasted in hot coals makes a tasty addition to this meal, whilst a strong brew of billy tea, sweetened with plenty of sugar, is also enjoyed.

With the introduction of these commodities as staple foods in the Aboriginal people's diet, there have been high incidences of obesity, heart disease, diabetes, blood pressure and other health problems. The introduction of salt and fatty takeaway foods has also contributed to these problems.

In the early days, flour was packed in calico bags, and the empty bags were used for the carrying of worldly possessions. Today, flour is usually packed in 16 kilogram drums. Empty drums have a variety of uses such as the carrying of water, storage, cooking pots, wash basins and babies' baths. They are also used as receptacles when hunting and foraging. With the tens of thousands of drums of flour sold in the Northern Territory, there must be myriads of empty drums lying scattered throughout the bush, defacing the environment.

Because tea, sugar and flour have been used in so many diverse ways, they at times must have brought a bitter taste to the lives of many Aboriginal people. However, there is no doubt there have also been advantages.

It is interesting to note that over the past twenty years, brown sugar and brown bread have in some areas become accepted and with the greater awareness of healthier eating habits, a wider range of fruit and vegetables and other nutritious food are now purchased and enjoyed.

CHAPTER 18

RELIGION

The Aboriginal people of the Northern Territory had little or no choice in the matter of religious affiliation. Port Keats, Bathurst and Melville Islands, were areas run as Roman Catholic Missions. The Baptist Church was present at the Government communities of Hooker Creek, Warrabri and Yuendumu, whilst Hermannsburg was established as a Lutheran Mission. Oenpelli, Roper River and other communities were under the auspices of the Church Missionary Society belonging to the Anglican Church, with Croker, Milingimbi, Goulburn and Elcho Islands, plus Yirrkala, under the umbrella of the Methodist Overseas Mission, later to become the Uniting Church. Maningrida was a Government settlement but had a Methodist minister. The Reverend Gowan Armstrong was that minister and, with his wife Shirley, worked tirelessly for ten years from late 1962. The church services were not exactly the same as in the city, as dogs of all shapes and sizes would wander in and out, or perhaps settle to scratch their fleas. Children and adults were always on the move throughout the service, babies were breast fed and an emu might pop its head in the door to see what was going on. Lavender bugs would dive-bomb the congregation to such an extent that, at night, many of the lights were switched off to discourage them. The Aboriginal people generally seemed interested, some reading the lesson and others offering up the prayers. Baptisms were held at the foreshore. A Tongan minister, Mossesse Latu, was appointed when Gowan decided to go to Darwin to live. Mossesse was ably assisted by Vainga Veikoso, the Tongan gardener, and of course by Bob Cross.

When Gowan and Shirley moved to Darwin, Gowan took up an appointment on the staff of Nungalinga College, where Aboriginal ministers are trained. Some time later, they moved to a new home in the suburbs of Darwin. Unfortunately, Cyclone Tracy struck and devastated this home which was built on pylons. The Armstrongs lost most of their worldly possessions, including their piano, which was picked up like a match stick and was found on the other side of the road, an absolute wreck. They later moved to Adelaide where Gowan is continuing his ministry.

Some of the older generation of Aborigines told me of the harsh treatment meted out to them by some very stern and patronising missionaries. Mick Magani, one of these Aborigines, said he could no longer stand all the humbug caused by one particular missionary, so he let fly with a spear and was charged with attempted murder and spent a term in gaol as a consequence. Silas Roberts also told of thrashings he received as a lad at the Roper River Mission.

Early education and health services can be attributed to some of the dedicated missionaries, although this in turn contributed to the breaking down of Aboriginal languages and culture. Some former mission staff say that a different approach to spreading the Word of God could have occurred had it not been for the changing Government policies of Segregation and Assimilation which had to be followed.

Some Aborigines have graduated from the Theological Colleges, and are now ministering to their own people, but, as in most societies, with the introduction of television and the availability of motor vehicles, there seems to have been a lessening of interest in Christian religion among Aborigines in some areas.

At Elcho Island, which I visited several times, there was a training school for store personnel set up by the Uniting Church. This was called the Arnhem Land Progress Association. The Arnhem Land Progress Association also established a warehouse in Darwin. This ran successfully for a number of years but eventually they relinquished control of the warehouse operation.

The Reverend Harold Shepherdson, MBE, known as Sheppie, was ordained as a minister to the Methodist Overseas Mission in 1954. He ministered to the people at Milingimbi, Elcho Island and surrounding areas, both as a lay preacher and minister, from 1928-69. Prior to his ordination, he was a fitter and turner. He also flew the Mission plane, calling in at various places to conduct services. He and his wife, who had been the first school teacher and for some time in charge of health services on Elcho Island, retired in 1969. After a few years of retirement at Elcho Island, they returned to South Australia. On one occasion I flew to Elcho Island on the Mission plane, piloted by Sheppie.

The reason for Les and Isabel Holt's return to Albury after twelve months of managing the bakery at Maningrida was that their religious views differed from those of the Uniting Church and they had applied to the Department of Aboriginal Affairs for the right to hold their own particular services at home. Their application was not approved so they felt obliged to return to Albury to continue their ministry. We all felt quite sad, as they were a lovely couple and had done a wonderful job in the bakery.

CHAPTER 19

EDUCATION

Whilst I am no authority on education on Aboriginal communities, I have been an interested spectator for over twenty years, and I believe education holds the key to the state of future Aboriginal development, particularly the three Rs. In my opinion, education seems an absolute necessity for Aboriginal people to know their rights and in some ways it also helps them to understand the complexities of our European society and technology. Whilst it may be impossible for some of the older generation to acquire these skills, future generations should be better equipped, even if, as in the past, many may still choose to opt out of being involved in the education system.

Some of the girls marry at a very early age and become mothers at a much younger age than most of their European counterparts, so an educational program should be implemented for when their children are more or less off their hands. More adult educators are needed.

With the young men, though, it is an even worse situation. There are so few jobs available on communities, it is sad to see very clever young men seemingly just wasting their lives. On present indications, some are likely to receive Unemployment Benefits or the like for the rest of their lives, some turn to alcohol, petty crime and gambling. What else is there for them to do? Ceremonies, sport and hunting do help a little to relieve the boredom. Unfortunately, sometimes Aboriginal Councils, which I support, may not know exactly how or to what extent, things could be improved in their community, and some people who go to communities to advise, occasionally appear too young and inexperienced to help.

In 1969, at Maningrida, there was not one child whose parents had ever been to a proper school. They, of course, did not see the necessity for sending their children to learn things foreign to them and their culture. They and their forebears had successfully survived for over 40,000 years without all that 'humbug'.

Peter Williams, the School Principal at Maningrida, took a great interest in his job, often spending a good deal of time after hours giving further

tuition, especially in mathematics, to the more senior students. Children had to attend school. When they were absent, Peter would go in search of his students, some of whom he would find hiding in the rafters of the roofs of their homes. He was on one occasion threatened with spears by several of his students who felt they were being pushed too hard with their education.

The Northern Territory Government is now responsible for its own education system which was previously run by Missions and the Department of Aboriginal Affairs on Aboriginal communities.

We had a fair knowledge of the education system in the Northern Territory as our son Mark attended the Aboriginal school at Maningrida for two years. Fortunately for him, it was all in English. I can see the problems facing white children in bilingual schools and I am sure teachers do try to help these students, but I guess it is the price one has to pay for living in a remote area. Mark was elected as a prefect by the Aboriginal students: the first white student to be afforded that honour at Maningrida.

Once Mark's class put on a play of a white hunter being attacked by black people and burnt at the stake. Mark, of course, was the white hunter. The audience really enjoyed the play and they were screaming with terror when the fire was lit, but, in the nick of time, one of the very tall, well-built Aboriginal lads slashed the cords which were tying Mark to the stake and threw him over his shoulder in a timely rescue, much to the relief and joy of the audience.

After Grade 6, we had to choose between sending Mark to Darwin or Adelaide to further his studies. The former was decided upon as the Anglican Church was just completing Carpentaria College, a boarding only establishment for outback students. Later, Geoff came up from Adelaide to board there and go to Nightcliff High School.

Unfortunately, this was a disappointing period of their education so we sent them both to Adelaide. Geoff and Mark were both successful and graduated from university — Geoff in Anthropology and Mark in Social Administration. We felt education, expensive though it was, to be one of the best gifts we could give our children to make a good foundation for their lives. Carpentaria College was destroyed by Cyclone Tracy.

By the time Geoff and Mark had finished their High School and part of their University education, they had been the recipients of Travel Allowance for the longest period of any Territory students. Now, of course, Darwin has its own University and TAFE College, so travel allowance is a thing of the past.

At Maningrida, Home Management was a course run by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs for the teaching of cooking skills and home

maintenance. The students used electric stoves and cleaned houses. Many of the students, at home, had only a fire as their cooking facility, whilst others did not have even a house to live in or clean. I guess this was a long-term program. Fortunately, housing has improved in some areas, so the knowledge gained at this course may now be of assistance.

For some years, Aborigines have been trained as teachers and others as teaching assistants, and proved themselves to be very capable in the field of education.

There is a lot of controversy about bilingual schools and there are two opposite views on the subject. It is not possible to operate a bilingual school in every community because children from various language groups may be attending the school.

CHAPTER 20

HEALTH

The state of health of the Aboriginal people varied from place to place. The people in the Top End appeared to have a better chance of good health with more pleasant surroundings, better weather and an abundance of Bush Tucker, including fruits, nuts, roots, kangaroos and bush turkeys, as well as fish and other types of sea food. Even then, some children had distended tummies as a result of malnutrition. At Maningrida, diseases such as leprosy, hepatitis and tuberculosis, heart disease, cancer, diabetes, diarrhoea, gastro-enteritis and trachoma were all in evidence.

Twenty years ago, at Maningrida, one person in six suffered to some degree from leprosy, which is such a debilitating disease. Now, new cases caught in the early stages can be cured, whilst long-standing cases can be held in check. It is very distressing to see people with deformities such as no fingers or toes; with leprosy, people can lose their sense of feeling and without realising it, may be badly burnt with fire or hot water.

Even though health services offered are reasonable, through lack of education, many patients have little understanding of how regular treatment will help them, whilst others, living in remote spots, often do not have ready access to these facilities, although now, at some out-stations, they have their own well-trained health workers. Other patients prefer the services of the local traditional medicine man; I believe some steps have been taken to integrate these two very different forms of medicine.

The Aerial Medical Service and the Royal Flying Doctor Service are a great boon in some isolated areas, enabling people to travel to hospital and receive specialist treatment in a minimum of time. Many patients hate having to travel to places like Alice Springs or Darwin, as they are then so far away from their families and friends and it can become quite a traumatic experience for them. I am sure that in some instances this slows down their recovery rate. People with terminal diseases like cancer may be sent as far afield as Adelaide, but many of the older generation say they would rather return to their families and homeland to die, than to exist a little longer, alone and so far from home. The European and Aboriginal nursing sisters, as well as health workers, all do a marvellous job and must

be congratulated on the way they cope with all sorts of situations such as accidents, midwifery, ailments, broken limbs and other complaints, while at the same time not always having adequate equipment at hand and more often than not only radio contact with a doctor, hospital or the Flying Doctor.

At one time, I was treated by Teresa Matthews, an Aboriginal health worker of many years' standing. She was most efficient and caring and, for several days, made it her business to check on how I was responding to her treatment. The results were excellent.

On one of the smaller communities, for some reason, there was to be no sister or health worker available for a few days, so I was asked by a visiting doctor if I would be responsible for the health services during their absence. Reluctantly, I agreed and hoped my services would not be required too often, especially as communication was anything but good with only a radio.

One of the Aboriginal Elders came and told me his mother was very sick and asked if I would go several kilometres down to the river bank where she was living, to check her out as she was in great pain. Although her skin was black, she then had a yellowish look about her and was doubled up with pain. I immediately went back to the clinic and radioed the Flying Doctor, then got her family to organise all the necessities for her to take to hospital. The woman only lived a further three weeks as she had terminal cancer. Her family all drove to Alice Springs to be with her until the time of her death.

While living in Alice Springs, I once, at a moment's notice, had to drive 350 kilometres out into the bush to manage a store for a few days as the store manager's wife had taken ill and needed an emergency operation. Her husband, understandably, wanted to be with his wife at that time.

Aborigines, both male and female, have for over twenty years been trained as health workers. Many have remained at their jobs for a number of years and have done excellent work.

To increase their services in the bush and on communities, the Health Department arranged for driving lessons to be given to their Aboriginal staff, which seemed an excellent idea.

CHAPTER 21

POLITICS, ABORIGINAL COUNCILS AND MINING

On occasions, politics in the Northern Territory have become quite volatile. Prior to the mid-seventies, Aboriginal people took very little interest or, in many instances, absolutely no interest at all in Federal or State politics, a sphere of activity so long denied them. Very few bothered to enrol in the elections of 1974. Of 1,000 Aborigines, there were 14 on the rolls in the Maningrida area.

It was a very different story in 1977 when the Blue Ribbon Country Liberal Party seat of Arnhem was lost to Labor — Bob Collins being the successful candidate. He subsequently held this seat in 1980 with the greatest majority in Australian political history.

The 1977 election brought about a hot-bed of intrigue at Maningrida — more so because the Country Liberal Party candidate, Rupert Kentish of Croker Island, hoped he would once again romp home as in the past. It was perceived that the Town Clerk of Maningrida, the Reverend Peter O'Connor, who was a keen Country Liberal Party supporter, would in the future be a logical successor to the incumbent member so he, too, was very busy campaigning. Opposing him for the Labor Party was Bob Collins, whom Glen had previously employed to manage the market garden at Cadell, who was now living in Darwin, but who was regarded more or less as a local. A third candidate in the electorate was Phil Brain, the Works Supervisor at Maningrida, so, with all three candidates being so close to home, it became a boots and all affair with all sides clearly having some support.

The goings-on made headline news in the Northern Territory papers; countless accusations were made, sharp practices were supposed to have been entered into — some areas of postal votes gaining 100% for one Party, depending on who had carried the mail to a remote community. It was a case of whose canoe crossed the rivers first. Bob Collins was said to be brain-washing Aboriginal people and putting them on the rolls, but what his opponents did not realise was that he had thought up the very smart strategy of getting his election spiels put on tape in the language of the people he visited. Rupert Kentish, on the other hand, had not been well and was not an energetic campaigner and in the past had not needed to be.

Phil Brain of the Progress Party never really stood a chance. Things got so heated that the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Mr Ian Viner, flew from Canberra to Maningrida to try to cool the situation.

Mining, especially of uranium, has caused many head- and heart-aches; also great wealth has come to some. When Peter O'Connor was the Superintendent of Goulburn Island, prior to his appointment at Maningrida, he contacted Glen as he felt there were so many mining companies seeking and being granted mining exploration leases and that, if some immediate action was not forthcoming, Aboriginal people would miss out and have no control or benefits from future mining in the area. The community agreed with the principle and eventually Goulburn Island and Maningrida joined forces and had many discussions with mining executives from around the world. There was great interest in the Northern Territory's, and especially Arnhem Land's rich mineral deposits. Uranium was not then an issue.

In the early 1970s, an agreement was signed between McIntyre Mines of Canada, Ocean Resources and Maningrida/Goulburn Island. A special corroboree was held on the island to mark the occasion. I flew over as Glen was unable to attend. At this celebration there was plenty of good food and Aboriginal dancing, both of which were enjoyed by all.

Exploration did take place but, because of the moratorium on uranium mining, there as yet has been no significant development. We used to debate the pros and cons of mining as we felt that in some ways it would make Aboriginal people more self-sufficient instead of relying on hand-outs all the time. On the other hand, mining should only happen providing Aboriginal people are agreeable. Of course, with any mining, every control should be employed to safeguard sacred sites and the environment. The East Alligator area, in my opinion, certainly has suffered because of mining and there is still much opposition to mining in Arnhem Land.

Initially, our stay at Maningrida was for six years, then, after a six months' break, at the request of the local people, we returned for another two years. Glen, as the Community Development Officer, was to help form their first Aboriginal Council, which was a requirement for the community to attract necessary government funding. In the first year, \$940,000 was forthcoming for a Council office, wages, capital equipment and on-going operating costs. The need for the formation of an Aboriginal Council was brought about because of the Federal Government's decision to close the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and in its place establish the Aboriginal Development Commission. This organisation was structured to have an Aboriginal person as its head and also to give Aboriginal people more opportunity for discussion and decision-making in their own affairs. Aboriginal Commissioners were elected from around Australia for this purpose. With the departure of the staff of the Department of Aboriginal

Affairs it was necessary for each community to establish an office for the receipt and dispensation of government funding, thus Aboriginal Councils were established. By definition these Councils were European orientated organisations and therefore quite foreign to the Aboriginal way of life which caused many problems. Sometimes, because of the different language groups involved, English was used for communication. At times, Aborigines were put forward as candidates for the Council because they were literate, but some of these people had little power in their Aboriginal group and consequently they were not able to make any on-the-spot decisions but had to return to the family group to discuss matters before any answers could be given. This made decision-making a very protracted, difficult and sometimes impossible event.

Six months after the establishment of the Maningrida Council, the Reverend Peter O'Connor of Goulburn Island was appointed Town Clerk. Glen was then re-appointed General Manager of the Maningrida Progress Association for another eighteen months.

CHAPTER 22

DEPARTURE FROM MANINGRIDA

Whilst living in the Top End of the Northern Territory, we took the opportunity of spending some of our holidays by going further north to Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Hong Kong, Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka, Burma, Nepal and the Philippines to see how life was lived in those countries. We thoroughly enjoyed and were fascinated by the experience. We also purchased two Around Australia air tickets and, for six weeks, visited many interesting cities and places within Australia.

The eight years we spent at Maningrida undoubtedly were the happiest and most rewarding of our lives. Because we loved the place and its people, and because our own lives had been enriched by the experience, our decision to leave was tinged with sadness, but we felt it was time to move on.

On the day we were finally leaving Maningrida, we went to the airport where a number of people had gathered to say good-bye. The plane was waiting and I could not understand what the hold-up was as we waited and waited for our boarding call. Eventually, a small charter plane came in to land and who should be on board but Helen Williams, whom I had previously taken on a trip south. She had married and was then living at Goulburn Island. Her family had paid for the charter so that she could say her farewells which then became a very emotional occasion.



1. The old shop at Maningrida



2. Young shoppers



3. Opening of new store, Maningrida, 13 March 1970



4. Glen and Willie conducting store in bush, Maningrida



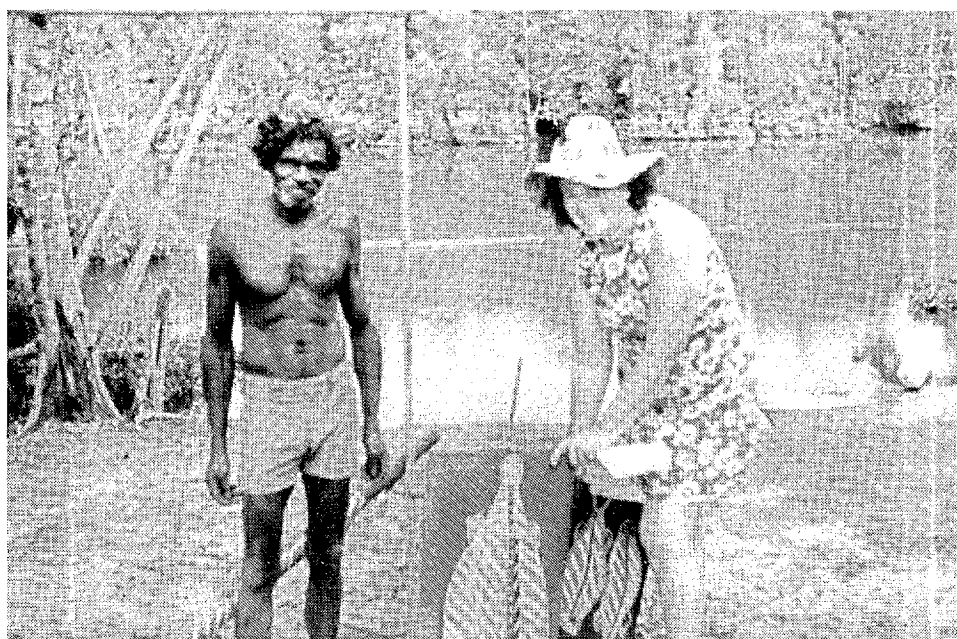
5. Nellie Melbaya, Garmedi shop



6. Morris and Jimmy working at the bakery in 1970s, Maningrida



7. Dug-out canoe in the making, Maningrida



8. I am purchasing craft work from Peter at Mormega



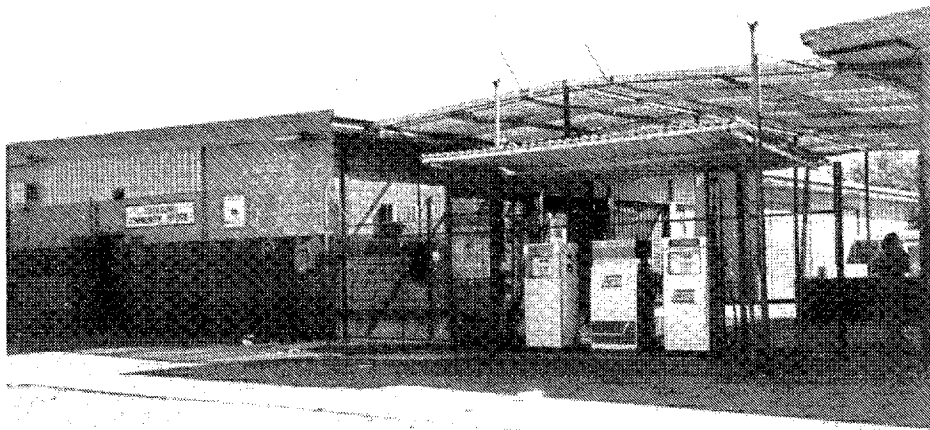
9. Gathering pandanus for weaving, Maningrida



10. Preparing for young man's ceremony, Maningrida



11. Yuendumu humpies, June 1993



12. Yuendumu Social Club Store

PART 2

THE CENTRE AND OTHER AREAS OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

CHAPTER 23

YUENDUMU

MAY — AUGUST 1978

On leaving Maningrida, Glen and I returned to Adelaide for a break, but were later contacted and asked if we would be interested in going to Yuendumu where there was an urgent need for a new store manager as the store was \$100,000 in debt. In May 1978, Glen set off alone on his way to Yuendumu, in the Northern Territory, which is located 300 kilometres north-west of Alice Springs. The town is surrounded by the Yuendum hills, which make an interesting backdrop for the community, but the town itself lacks any appealing physical features. He had to spend five days with the incumbent manager, who incidentally had asked for and received a \$1,000 bonus for his efforts! Glen could hardly contain himself during that period as, at a glance, he could see so many things needing to be rectified. The Yuendumu Social Club operated the store, and the day before he actually took over its management, Glen drove to Alice Springs to pick me up after I had arrived on a flight from Adelaide.

As Yuendumu is situated on the southern extremity of the Tanami Desert, I expected to find a parched red desert. But that was not to be, for the first few weeks at least, as all the way out to Yuendumu it rained incessantly — totalling in all 380 millimetres — and the roads were running like rivers with 44-gallon drums being swept along like match-sticks. We slithered and slid the 300 kilometres in the red mud and slush with the water lapping the bottom of the vehicle doors. It was a nightmare of a drive and we were very relieved to reach our destination safely.

The manager's residence was reasonably modern and even had a microwave oven, but the bricks from which the house had been built were so porous, the rain poured through like a sieve. It is no wonder we suffered with endless colds. Eventually, when the rains ceased, the cold, icy winds blew across the desert as though they had come non-stop from the South Pole. Alice Springs has an average of thirty-five frosts a year and I would think Yuendumu would have had a comparable number. To protect them from the cold, the women would buy cotton blankets, wrap one around their waists as a long skirt and another around their shoulders as a cape; their feet and legs were usually bare. On frosty mornings, our

fingers would be so stiff and cold it was difficult to operate the cash registers.

On such a freezing day, there was nothing more disturbing than to see a naked infant placed in a steel shopping trolley, sucking away on an ice block; it absolutely sent shudders down my spine, especially as the mother was rugged up like a woolly bear, and appeared quite unconcerned about her child's welfare.

The Yuendumu Social Club had, a few years prior to our arrival, built a shopping complex with \$250,000 on loan from the Aboriginal Loans Commission. This complex consisted of a supermarket, hobby shop, clothing store, post office, bank agency and take-away food outlet. A central mall divided them. There was also a community hall of quite sizeable proportions. The manager's office was air-conditioned, had piped music, intercom systems, closed-circuit television, and carpet on the floor, plus modern office furniture.

Even with all the money spent on this vast complex, the check-outs were placed right at the tilt-a-door entrances. In the summer, the check-out operators boiled and in the winter they froze. In fairness to this manager, the buildings had been constructed prior to his arrival. After he left, a stock-take was done and unsuitable, unsaleable goods were weeded out and marked down or written right off. It was a mammoth task as Glen and I were the only Europeans on the staff. There were even magnificent Webb Corbett crystal glasses at \$42 for a half a dozen, which, of course, were totally unsuitable for Aboriginal communities.

The interior of the store was re-designed and a partition removed, making room for all the clothing to be transferred from the clothing store, as were the goods from the hobby shop, thus bringing them all under the same roof with the meat, groceries, frozen foods, blankets, manchester and hardware, placing everything under constant supervision. Otherwise, there was no way either of us could ever go to Alice Springs to see suppliers. The check-outs were also moved to a better site.

In our early days at Yuendumu, when Glen was assessing the Aboriginal staff, he was told the best girl had left. Down to the camp he went, found her home, which was a humpy, then squatted in the red mud and talked with Noreen and asked her why she was not working in the store. She told him she had not got on with the previous manager. After further discussion, Glen pointed out that the store belonged to the Aboriginal people, and he and I were just there to help and that if the local people of the Warlpiri tribe were not prepared to do their bit to help, we would not be staying.

Noreen certainly was a young woman who was not afraid to speak her mind, which she did, and eventually said, yes she would start work the

next day. We then had a marvellous rapport with her and the rest of the Aboriginal staff. She was also told she would receive quite a good wage each week. Straight away she took Glen to task and said, 'Glen, I thought you said you had been working with Aboriginal people for nine years. What on earth is the sense of me getting all my money on pay days? You know quite well my family and relations will only take it from me'. She asked that each staff member be allowed to book-down up to \$20 per day at the store to enable their own families to eat properly, and that these amounts would be deducted from their weekly pay. This scheme was put into operation. It was an unheard of practice in those days, but is now a common occurrence.

The check-out operators also had problems as sometimes their relations would arrive at the cash registers with loads of goods for which they more often than not, knowingly, had insufficient money to cover. Glen and the girls devised a plan whereby, with a little bell, they would draw either Glen's or my attention to the impending problem and would pretend they urgently needed to go to the toilet whilst one of us would take over and ring up the number of goods sufficient for the value of the customer's money. Had the girls done this, they would, after hours, have suffered reprisals at the hands of their relatives. As they said, they wanted to be honest but their families made it very difficult at times.

We ordered and were supplied with goods from Adelaide and Alice Springs fortnightly. Then came the back-breaking task of unloading the road-trains. In those days, we did not have the luxury of palletisation, fork lifts and pallet jacks. The girls, however, displayed great physical strength and carried cartons of fruit, meat and other goods, which were so heavy we felt ashamed. But there again, in the camp, you would see really old women carrying incredible loads of goods on their heads or a very heavy flour drum in hand with perhaps a small child perched on their shoulders and numerous other articles tucked under their arms. It surely is a man's world in some Aboriginal communities with the men thinking that kind of job to be women's work, and at that time at Yuendumu we were unable to get any male assistance. Fortunately, over the years, that idea has changed a little. They did have a conveyor belt which was supposed to be a help, but it was so high that to load and off-load goods was just an added substantial chore.

Often at weekends, we would go out with the staff hunting for goannas, witchety grubs and honey ants. We would set off, armed with sticks, crowbars and tomahawks. The grubs were the easiest to find and, after a while, we became quite adept in hunting them. The girls did not bother to wait to cook the grubs but would eat them like natural oysters. They were about 7 to 8 centimetres long, whitish in colour, with their insides being the colour and texture of raw egg yolk and just as slimy. Others would hunt goannas and honey ants, and after they had been successful, we

would gather piles of wood for their camp fires, climb on board and head for home.

One Sunday afternoon at about four o'clock, the sun was shining brightly for about the first time in weeks, so Glen suggested we should go for a short drive out into the bush on our own, just to get away from it all. We chose a back road and headed off in a southerly direction towards Papunya. We knew the road was rough as well as sandy but with all the rains the wattles and wild flowers were beautiful and the Desert Oak trees fascinating, some of them being so black and gnarled they looked as though they had survived since the world began. The River and Ghost Gums were magnificent. As they shed their bark, they revealed such unblemished, delicately coloured, smooth, rounded, fleshy contours, and with their outstretched branches, reminded me of graceful young maidens disrobing. The desert was certainly blooming and the countryside a picture. A glimpse of Mount Wedge, the shape of which makes it true to name, was a lovely sight. In those days, it was claimed to be the geographical centre of Australia, but now, with the latest computers and state-of-the-art technology, a more accurate centre has been proclaimed.

We passed a lovely billabong where cattle were grazing and drinking under the shade of the eucalypts, and also spotted an enormous wedge-tailed eagle perched high in dead branches above, on the look out and ready to pounce on some poor, unsuspecting prey. Apparently, rabbits are one of its favourite delectable morsels. Blue, turquoise and green parrots on the wing made a magnificent splash of colour, reminding me of the richness and colour of Thai silk. All in all, it was a very pleasant and enjoyable Sunday afternoon drive until our very temperamental Ford F100 utility became bogged in the deep, red sand and there was no way we could get enough power to move this heavy vehicle so, as it was then about 5pm, and unlikely that there would be any passing traffic for that day, we were left with no alternative but to set about walking home.

I was dressed in a summer frock, angora cardigan, sneakers and no stockings. We locked the vehicle after collecting our can of orange juice and a couple of apples in case we needed sustenance on the way. Of course, we had forgotten to bring our torch, but nevertheless, off we set. We had not walked very far when the light began to fade and it grew colder and colder by the minute, penetrating our clothing as though it was non-existent. Not even whilst holidaying in the sub-zero temperatures of Scandinavia, as our giant ferry crashed its way through the pack-ice of the Baltic Sea between Helsinki and Stockholm, did I feel as cold; admittedly, I was more suitably clothed on that occasion. It became a really black, clear, crisp, frosty night as we stumbled and tripped over ruts, boughs and stones, with the sand and gravel filling my shoes until several of my toes were raw and bleeding, making it necessary for me to remove one of my shoes and struggle on with one shoe on and the other shoe off. We off-loaded the orange juice and apples as it was far too cold to think about

drinking or eating. Glen thought he should go ahead to get help, but I would have been frozen stiff if I had had to sit by the side of the road and wait, and in any case, the cattle were lowing and the bulls bellowing nearby. I kept trying in the darkness to detect the outline of a bush or tree to hide behind or climb in the event of them making a charge. On we trudged whilst I offered up silent prayers for help. At about nine o'clock, from behind the Yuendum hills, the brilliant near full moon appeared in the unpolluted sky. After the pitch darkness it was just so dazzling and brilliant, and ridiculous as it may sound, I had to get out my sunglasses and put them on to avoid the glare. What a help, though, to have some light as we staggered on hour after hour. Finally, in the distance, we could see the lights of Yuendumu, which, because of the contour of the land and consequent curve of the road, took us another hour to reach. At midnight, absolutely exhausted, hungry and chilled to the bone, we thawed out under hot showers, devoured hot drinks and, after a quick meal, went off to bed.

The next morning, we contacted the mechanic and asked him if he would kindly rescue our vehicle for us and at the same time measure the distance we had walked. We knew it was a fair way as we had not stopped walking and it had taken us seven hours, but we were amazed to find we had in fact walked 30 kilometres. Never again do I hope to go for such a moonlight hike. Obviously we should have told somebody where we were going, but instead learnt our lesson the hard way.

Aboriginal men generally are quite good bush mechanics, although we have come across some of them 100 kilometres from anywhere, patiently and philosophically waiting for some help, which may have been for them an hour or a day or two away. On several occasions when travelling, I have had a flat tyre, and have been most grateful for their assistance. Four-wheel drive Toyota or F100 tyres generally are far too heavy for most women, especially when travelling alone.

At any time, if I saw a vehicle driven by an Aborigine approaching I had no fear, but had it been a white man, I would definitely not have felt so secure. If Glen was unable to travel with me, I preferred to travel the 300 kilometres to Alice Springs alone. As the roads were so terrible, I did not want the added responsibility of other people's lives, especially riding in the back of a utility. Sometimes, as I would enter Alice Springs and see an armoured van drive past, I wondered just how much money the security guards were protecting. I usually had, unguarded, between \$50,000 and \$80,000 stashed away in calico bags lying on the floor beside me. Fortunately, there are more secure methods of banking these days. One store manager told us how his assistant manager decided to keep going instead of visiting the bank. He was apprehended and it still paying back the money by instalments at the direction of the Courts.

While at Maningrida, I had thought some of the housing was absolutely appalling, but those dwellings were palaces compared with the humpies at

Yuendumu. Even in 1993, some Aborigines are still living under such primitive conditions with no running water or sanitation. As some of our staff lived like this, we had first-hand knowledge of what the conditions were really like. I must give credit to a number of people though, who, with a couple of sheets of iron, maybe a tarpaulin for a roof and a few blankets, and perhaps a mattress, had a very humble, snug little dwelling. They say, 'Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home', but in this day and age it seems unacceptable that Aboriginal people are living in such appalling conditions. Is it any wonder there are so many health problems in these areas, especially as the environment of the desert is subjected to the extremes of climatic conditions of both heat and cold. I can only compare these humpies with slum conditions I witnessed in places like India, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines. The only redeeming features in the Northern Territory are that there is not the overcrowding as in the other countries mentioned, and at least most Aboriginal people are on Social Service or some other type of benefits and have education and health services readily available, and there is less pollution.

Whilst agreeing that it is tragic that there are so many disadvantaged people in the world, I am sure that if Australian politicians, who so vocally criticise living conditions of some of the world's disadvantaged people and perceived breaches of human rights, acquainted themselves with the appalling standard of living of some of Australia's indigenous people, they would be less critical of others.

All was going well at the store and, after the initial clean up, we became really organised and were enjoying the challenge of recouping the lost \$100,000. Three months had gone by when we received a surprise visit from Peter Williams, the former Principal of the Maningrida School. He had resigned from the Education Department and taken up a position as Executive Officer of Yolngu Association in Katherine. This organisation had, among other things, recently opened a very small warehouse to assist communities in the bush. Peter had consulted the Aboriginal Loans Commission in Darwin about funding for expansion of this venture and was told that unless he could come up with a competent manager, the money would not be made available. Peter had admiration for Glen and his ability, hence the visit. Glen is not a keen wholesaler but prefers retailing — we earlier had our own store in South Australia — as he likes to hear the tinkle of the money going straight into the cash register. Anyway, after some persuasion, Glen accepted the job, which meant the signing of a contract for two years as General Manager of Baruwei Enterprises.

We had substantially reduced the store debt at Yuendumu, and we knew of a replacement for the store manager's job, so once again our suitcases and tea chests were packed, and back up north we headed — this time to Katherine.

CHAPTER 24

BARUWEI ENTERPRISES SEPTEMBER 1978 — DECEMBER 1980

In September 1978, the town of Katherine, Northern Territory, had a population of between three and four thousand people. The town straddles the Stuart Highway, which, in fact, is still its main street. It is 300 kilometres south of Darwin and 1,450 kilometres north of Alice Springs, with the Katherine River flowing through the northern perimeter of the town proper. Surprisingly, this river is the first permanently flowing stream north of Adelaide in South Australia. Early explorers such as John McDouall Stuart were, I am sure, delighted to discover this wonderful river, but at the same time, must have found it very difficult to cross.

In the initial stages of the formation of Baruwei Enterprises, Glen and I were the only Europeans on the staff. Glen stayed in Katherine to organise the warehouse and Aboriginal staff while I travelled to southern capitals to open the necessary accounts and lines of supply.

First, I scanned the Yellow Pages of the telephone books, and visited stores where I looked at and checked labels for the type of goods we required; as we were in Cattle Country, western gear was a must. I then visited clothing factories, became very well acquainted and involved with firms such as R M Williams, Akubra, Bonds and Lee Jeans, as well as other men's, women's and children's wear manufacturers, plus wholesalers in groceries, hardware, canvas goods such as swags and tents, dress materials, manchester, pillows and mattresses. The only unsuccessful bid for an account was where the business executive was a woman! Later, we imported goods from Singapore and Indonesia. Initially, our customers were Aboriginal bush communities, followed by the Aboriginal community stores of Bamyili, now called Barunga, and Beswick.

At any time, to have virtually to start from scratch to build and establish an Aboriginal organisation is not easy, but life was made far more difficult because of an article which appeared in one of the Northern Territory newspapers pointing out just what a racist town Katherine really was; the headlines called it 'A Town Like Malice'. It was a hard struggle, as many European organisations and businesses were upset by our organisation's ability to attract loan moneys at lower interest rates than they themselves

could obtain, and I guess this was understandable and fair criticism. Even warehouses in Darwin were hot on our trail with abuse and some local business people said they would not have their goods delivered by any black b...s. There were even complaints to the Northern Territory Government. As we were in competition with multinationals such as Elders and others, when complaints reached the notice of the Chief Minister, he suggested that if the people who were complaining had the necessary business acumen and expertise needed and really got their act together, they should have nothing to fear from a small, new Aboriginal organisation.

Mainoru Station, a station owned by Europeans, was the first cattle station to come onto our books; then, via the Territory grapevine, word spread of our existence. We understand that Baruwei was discussed at great length at the Cattlemen's Association meetings and, by the time our two years were up, we had many stations as customers, as well as numerous Aboriginal communities, the combination of which covered a vast area of the Northern Territory and even over the Western Australian border.

A number of these stations and communities are cut off by flood waters and isolated for part or the whole of the Wet Season, so several months' supplies of food and other goods and necessities had to be ordered, procured and delivered to our customers well in advance of that season. On one occasion, we assisted the police with the supplying and packing of food for an emergency air-drop for people stranded in flooded isolated areas.

We had a number of customers in the town of Katherine as well as in neighbouring towns such as Pine Creek and Mataranka. As time went on, it was interesting to see some of our most outspoken critics and some racist business people gradually becoming quite good customers. They could not really resist as we had some vital agencies like Coca-Cola, CSR supplying sugar, and QUF supplying ice-cream and frozen foods.

It was really quite enjoyable working with most of the people from the communities and the stations; people in the bush are certainly a race apart. I was also to learn just how much of the Northern Territory was under pastoral leases to foreign consortiums and investors: the United States of America, Israel, Brunei, Sabah, Malaysia, Britain and Hong Kong are some which come to mind. It was surprising to hear one of the American station owners, who incidentally also owned a ranch in Montana, USA, giving high praise to the Aboriginal stockmen. In his opinion, they were without peer and just naturals in the saddle and American cowboys could not match their high standard of riding skills and efficiency.

The introduction of full Award wages for Aboriginal people, though very desirable, also had unfortunate consequences, as many Aborigines lost their jobs because station owners could no longer afford to employ them

in such numbers, and helicopters and pilots, known as 'the iron cowboys', were used instead for mustering and still are. When we landed at Victoria River Downs one day, we counted thirteen helicopters being prepared for action.

Glen and I have seemingly had a reputation of being fairly tough in our business dealings, both in the retail and wholesale world of the Northern Territory, but it was surprising how many staff followed us to various places.

Baruwei was 49% owned by Yolngu and 51% by the Aboriginal Loans Commission. The Board consisted of a cross-section of both Aboriginal and Loans Commission personnel, as well as some Darwin businessmen. They were all well-intentioned and experts in their own fields of endeavour but some lacked the necessary expertise in this particular business venture to really make any significant contribution, often lacking the vision for future development by invariably opting for the status quo. Glen and I felt that the Aboriginal communities with which we were dealing should be share-owning participants and that, in return, Baruwei would receive more support, loyalty and, of course, more trade, but the Board would not agree. Later, when Yanangu, an Aboriginal warehouse, was opened in Alice Springs, this scheme was successfully adopted.

At times, I felt Glen was lucky that I was no delicate shrinking violet as on occasions I physically had to work very hard. This happened once when an assistant manager left after just a few months as he had to attend Court in New South Wales because of divorce proceedings. That was in September 1979, and the Board of Directors took until the following April to appoint a replacement. I almost felt like becoming a Women's Lib. supporter as the Board considered me only as the Manager's wife. Things only changed when I spoke up and asked them who on earth they thought had been filling the assistant manager's role, with no additional pay, for seven months.

During our twenty years of working with and for Aboriginal people, except for two years when Glen later worked for the Aboriginal Development Commission, we have always worked together as a team. Because of the resignation of the assistant manager, we had to forego an already planned and booked holiday to Europe which was a great blow as we really needed that break.

Katherine must be one of Australia's hottest towns. Often in the corrugated iron warehouse it would be approximately 46°C day after day. Down south, staff probably would have been stood down on such occasions, but we had to battle on, especially as we only had a minimum of staff and equipment and road-trains still arrived and had to be unloaded, orders collated, book work put in order and deliveries organised. Later, more people such as Helen Stratford, Tom Swain, Andrew Henderson, Ed

Jenkins, Chris Swain, as well as more Aboriginal staff such as Sally Cartright, were employed.

Glen had stipulated we would definitely only stay at Baruwei for the required two years. During this time we covered a great deal of the Northern Territory as well as Aboriginal communities near Kununurra, Wyndham, Turkey Creek and others in Western Australia. I was fascinated by the unique shape of the baobab trees in this Western Australian area. On several occasions I also visited Beswick and Bamyili to help reorganise the clothing sections of their stores, and took Raylene, an Aboriginal girl from Bamyili on a buying trip down south.

The business progressed in leaps and bounds, so much so that by the time of the completion of Glen's contract, we had an annual turnover of \$3.5-4 million and good commensurate profits. It was then that Tom Swain, who had been on our staff at Maningrida, took over from Glen as the General Manager.

Whilst in Katherine, we joined the Uniting Church under the ministry of the Reverend Ross Everard, with his wife Jenny and three children. It was one of the most go-ahead and friendly churches we have ever attended. After completing Glen's two-year contract, it was back home to Adelaide, but before we left, Glen had said to Tom that if at any time either of us could be of assistance, just give us a call!

CHAPTER 25

LAJAMANU

FEBRUARY—AUGUST 1981

It did not take long for Tom to get in touch. Within three weeks he was on the phone taking up Glen's offer of help. He had been approached by the Hooker Creek community, now known as Lajamanu, who wanted Baruwei to manage and be responsible for their community store for twelve months. The matter was urgent as the store was \$113,000 in debt and the manager had left.

Initially, Glen was going alone, but he persuaded me that the first couple of weeks were vital so he needed my help. We hurriedly packed the minimum necessities and fourteen hours later, flew out of Adelaide Airport en route to Alice Springs, where a charter plane was waiting to fly us direct to Lajamanu, an Aboriginal community of approximately 800 people, situated near the northern extremity of the Tanami Desert and bordering the giant Wave Hill Cattle Station. My heart sank as I saw it was a single-engined aircraft. After Arnhem Land, I had vowed that I was never again going to fly in any plane with less than two engines, but as there was no other choice, we took off and really had a very pleasant flight, crossing the Tanami Desert. It was, in fact, an unusual flight as, with heavy rains, most of the desert was under water.

On arrival at Lajamanu, we were shown the house and the store, both of which were absolutely filthy. The house looked as though it was from the set of the television series *The Addams Family*, with spiders and cobwebs festooning the place. Daddy-longlegs spiders seem to proliferate at Lajamanu. A team came out from Katherine for a stocktake, after which we started on the onerous task of the big clean up.

It was well in the 40°C area each day, neither the evaporative air conditioner in the shop nor in the house worked, and had not done so for ages. Why on earth they ever installed them in isolated places I cannot imagine, as in most of the remote communities, there is so much lime in the water. In no time, they become clogged up and ineffectual. We were promised in five weeks they would be repaired. Five months later, still nothing had happened and we were still waiting.

The indigenous Aboriginal people were of the Gurindji tribe, but they were forced off their land because the people of the Warlpiri tribe were moved there by government departments, because in places like Yuendumu, there was overcrowding and insufficient water and services for so many people. As Lajamanu was on a stock route, the logistics of water supply, power and services were not only a great deal cheaper but also of easier access. We were soon to meet with some of the former people from Yuendumu so began to feel more at home. It is true that, if you have ever worked in the Northern Territory, you are bound to meet again with a great number of Aboriginal as well as European people somewhere in the vast expanse.

Lajamanu community was run by the local Aboriginal Council. It was the first Aboriginal Council to be formed and run under the Northern Territory Local Government Authority system. Maurice Luther, MBE, was the first Aboriginal Town Clerk, Lindsay Herbert the Aboriginal Works Manager and there were European managers for the Cattle Project, Housing Association and Outstations Organisation. A European plumber was also employed. Jeanie Herbert, a very efficient Aboriginal woman, was in charge of administration for the local Council. She had been employed by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in Darwin for several years. The Council paid accounts and computed all the wages for the Council staff.

Living on the community were also two European policemen with their families, three health sisters, a power house mechanic, Baptist minister with his wife and family, YMCA worker, the School Principal and staff of twelve teachers. In 1980, a census revealed there were in fact 703 Aborigines with 50 European men, women and children in residence.

For outside communication there was a radio-telephone in the Council office. Lajamanu was also accessed by a twice-weekly air service out of Katherine, via Victoria River Downs and Wave Hill Stations. This service was used for passengers, mail and urgent supplies. There was also a weekly partly-refrigerated road-train for the delivery of the store's supplies.

In the early 1970s, if somebody was posted to Lajamanu, everybody wondered just what they had done wrong, as it was considered the end of the road. Mind you, there are not too many places as isolated. It is 600 kilometres south-west of Katherine, in those days over a very rough road, and 900 kilometres north-west of Alice Springs.

Before our arrival, a long drought had broken and about 210 millimetres of rain had fallen, which cut the roads for weeks. The road-train bringing the store's supplies was unable to proceed past Wave Hill, 100 kilometres away. After various unsuccessful attempts to cross the flooded rivers and as the store's stocks were becoming very depleted, it was decided to fly some of the perishables the 100 kilometres from Wave Hill to Lajamanu. We could not believe it then, nor will I ever forget the stupidity of some people. The pilot had flown over to make the arrangements and told us that our 1,000 loaves of

bread had become mouldy, so next day, what did he do, but fly over 1,000 loaves of mouldy bread, leaving most of the other perishables behind, at a cost of \$1.11 per kilogram. I was at the airport to help with the unloading and once again, I lost my cool when one of the Europeans said, 'No problem, not to worry, just cut off the mould and sell it to the Aborigines.' Aborigines have, since the appearance of white man in the Northern Territory, often suffered at the hands of the white mediocrity.

After a month of scrubbing, polishing, painting and installing some new refrigeration in the store, Jim King, who owned and ran the road-train which brought the store supplies, arrived with a special delivery of fuel. I made a snap decision and asked him if I could drive back to Katherine with him so I could then go back to Adelaide to finish packing our goods at home. We left Lajamanu at eleven o'clock, arriving at Wave Hill at one o'clock, where I sat on an empty flour drum in the scorching heat for several hours whilst Jim unloaded and pumped diesel into the power house tanks. We eventually arrived in Katherine just after midnight, by which time I felt as though I had ridden a horse bare-back all the way, as there were no springs in the passenger seat of the road-train. I was away ten days.

Travelling in the Territory was always an experience and quite an adventure in a road-train. Road-trains are enormous vehicles consisting of a prime mover and up to three tiered trailers attached. They can be a traffic hazard to other drivers, especially when they are carrying cattle; the loads are so heavy the drivers just cannot afford to get off the road for fear of overturning. In the event of their having to leave the road for a passing motorist, the clouds of dust are absolutely blinding and the wind created is of gale force. Tourists who are unfamiliar with these situations have had many moments of panic or accidents by not giving way to these monsters.

An additional danger was livestock on the roads. Because cattle stations in the Northern Territory are so immense, the cost of fencing them is prohibitive, so in certain areas there are road signs warning of wandering cattle. At night, these animals are particularly hazardous. Many are hit and killed, and sometimes, unfortunately, the drivers and passengers in vehicles are also seriously injured or lose their lives. Decaying animal carcasses are to be found and smelt all along the roads, and especially in the heat-wave conditions, the stench is sickening. Tragically, one dark night a road-train driver thought he had driven over one of these dead animals only to find he in fact had killed an Aborigine who was sleeping on the bitumen road for warmth and, unfortunately, had not heard the approach of his vehicle.

The Aboriginal men from Lajamanu had a fearsome reputation, and if the local football team was visiting Katherine, we were told the police were alerted to be at the ready for such an occasion. In our seven-month experience, however, they proved to be very gentle and peace-loving people. One of the reasons for this was that Lajamanu had been proclaimed a dry area at the request of a number of the local Aborigines. The men in general were

opposed to the change, but the women, some of whom were quite powerful tribally, outvoted them. With no alcohol, the men and a few women drinkers had to travel to Top Springs, 285 kilometres north-west, or the same distance south-west to Rabbit Flat for their favourite watering holes.

On Aboriginal communities it is illegal for Europeans to sell liquor to Aborigines. A European was fined \$750 for bringing in cartons of beer and selling them to Aborigines and, in addition, received a three months' gaol sentence for selling liquor to Aborigines for profit. It is mandatory for Europeans on Aboriginal communities to obtain a licence to consume and to import liquor for their own consumption. To obtain a licence, they must first apply to the local Council, then if approval is given, another application is made to the Northern Territory Liquor Commission, also to be approved by them in conjunction with the local Council. A few Aborigines did get a licence, but that was not the general rule. Personally, I feel that if it is a dry area, Europeans should respect that fact and not sit out in their gardens drinking in full view of the Aborigines. In fact, I think it would be better if they did not get a licence at all, as it certainly causes quite a lot of resentment with one law for the white people and another for the Aborigines.

The Baptist Church seemed to have a reasonable following at Lajamanu, though at family worship to see the congregation of men on one side of the church and women on the other seemed to me a bit unusual for that denomination. Apparently it was at the request of the Aboriginal men to follow their traditional ways. The church initiated and was responsible for a hot midday meal for pensioners, for which they paid a nominal amount. Second-hand clothing was also sold by the church to defray some of the costs.

For the first time in my life, although not a small person, I was dwarfed by some of the ladies there. Some would optimistically ask for a size 18 frock when, in fact, a size 28 would have been more fitting. Often it was amazing and interesting to watch the life cycle of a garment. It would be worn by an assortment of girls and women of all ages, shapes and sizes, and if it was a T-shirt, boys and men might also give it a turn.

As mentioned previously, polygamy is widely practised. One staff member was the fifth wife of a prominent citizen so I was interested to know how many children they had between them. It was a large family, but all children were adopted as the husband was unable to become a natural father.

Outwardly, the generation gap between a great-grandmother, grandmother, mother, daughter, grand-daughter and great grand-daughter was quite noticeable; from the real bush lady to the sophisticated school girl who was being educated away from the community. There is no doubt European contact has been responsible for many changes to the lifestyle of Aborigines, especially those living on communities and in towns.

A number of Aboriginal men were chosen to represent Australia in a cultural exchange to the United States of America and I had a great time assisting with the outfitting of them for their trip abroad. They were very anxious to go and were apparently wonderful ambassadors for Australia. Although some became extremely homesick and were more than happy to set foot back at Lajamanu and be with their families, they said they were glad they had had the opportunity to go for such a trip and would appreciate any further chances for overseas travel. They all looked very swish in their heavily embroidered western shirts bought in the USA. Their families were also very excited about the return of the travellers and the gifts they had brought back for them.

In the shop I introduced a few nightdresses, and it was an hilarious event to see the women come and inspect the reasonably glamorous garments. They could not believe European women changed into such clothing in which to sleep, and they would titter away at the very thought of it. Some of the women living in houses purchased a nightdress but, of course, in a humpy out in the bush, it obviously was not the garment they required.

Six out-stations had been set up in the bush for people wanting to return to their homeland. One day a child came into the shop and asked the price of a bicycle, which at that time was well over \$100. Glen asked him if he could afford it. He smartly replied, 'Not today, but it will not be a problem in the future as they have found gold at our out-station'. Sure enough, North Flinders have since mined large quantities of gold at The Granites.

We were to have a short visit to Lajamanu by Commodore Johnston, the Administrator of the Northern Territory. Maurice Luther asked me if I would take charge of the catering arrangements for fifty Aboriginal people who had been invited to meet the Administrator. Although the visit coincided with lunch time, Maurice had been advised that it would not be necessary to provide lunch for the visitors. About twenty minutes prior to the scheduled time of arrival, I made a last minute dash to where the reception was to be held just to check if everything was in order, after which I was going to hurry home and change my clothes. I had been so busy I had not even had time to tidy myself or my hair and must have looked a positive wreck. To my embarrassment, I found the visitors had arrived earlier than expected and must have, after all, decided that they were hungry as they were already tucking into and seemingly enjoying the repast. I was the only local European present, and before I could make my escape to tidy myself, Maurice introduced me to the Administrator and we all had a good laugh at my predicament.

Most European women have little social life on outback communities and it seems a pity that organisers of VIP visits do not allow more time for these visits so that all locals have the opportunity of enjoying such occasions. I realise people in public life are very busy, but were it not for the numbers of people in the bush, Aboriginal as well as European, many people in places like Darwin and Alice Springs would be without jobs. Reading the social

column in the Northern Territory newspapers you seldom saw where bush people had been invited or had attended social functions. After all, they are perhaps more truly Territorians and their contribution just as great or greater than the city folk who are often just short-term city dwellers.

The custom of some Aborigines having multiple wives can at times cause problems. One of our female staff was promised to a man who lived about 750 kilometres south of Lajamanu, and her future husband came to claim her as his second wife and off she went to his homeland. She became very lonely and homesick, so returned to Lajamanu. He now has to travel the 750 kilometres there and 750 kilometres back to his wife.

Much as we would have liked to explore the area, we had little opportunity to do so as the store vehicle had broken down beyond repair before our arrival. In the seven months we were at Lajamanu, except for my trip to Adelaide and an hour's drive around the cattle project, without a telephone and television and with poor radio reception, life became rather boring. It was there, with plenty of time to reflect on life at Maningrida, that I started jotting down notes just in case I needed them for future reference.

Work in the store, however, had progressed and the store takings, which had averaged about \$12,000 per week on our arrival, had in six months escalated to \$20,000 per week, with all the debts cleared.

Actually, with the changes in lifestyle of Aboriginal people, the women seemingly have had to change the most because, in their culture, one of the women's main roles was the responsibility of gathering bush foods and firewood. This has been superseded by shopping at the store and some now have houses with electric stoves and other appliances. Nevertheless, bush turkeys and kangaroos, if available, and damper are still favourite meals. With more time on their hands and much unemployment, both men and women turned to card playing and gambling. It was not an uncommon occurrence on a pay day to see men and women win in the vicinity of \$2,000-\$3,000 in an hour or two. The losers seemed to take their losses philosophically, even though their families might be short on store purchases until the next pay day. At least more hunting gets done, so people are probably eating just as well, if not better, anyway. Often food was shared between families.

Hawkers frequently liked to come to the community to trade, but as the shop became better stocked and more viable, the Council banned them as their arrival was always scheduled to coincide with pay day to skim the cream of the money off the community. It was not what they could do to help the community, but what they could take out to help themselves that mattered and often that was plenty. We felt they had an unfair trading advantage as the shop had wages for the staff on lean days as well as the busy ones, and also the overheads of power, water and insurance. Any store profits were poured back into the community.

The Aboriginal Development Commission was greatly perturbed about the number of Aboriginal stores in the Northern Territory which were constantly going broke, so they decided to set up an independent advisory body which, in effect, really had no power or control over the store managers as all stores were community owned. The store managers saw little merit in the organisation, especially as the person chosen to head the committee had lived outside Australia for the past ten years and had little or no knowledge of the area or relevant suppliers, or indeed, the needs of Aboriginal people.

After being at Lajamanu for seven months, we had a visit from Sam Miles of the Northern Territory branch of the Aboriginal Development Commission asking Glen if he would be interested in going back to Yuendumu as in the two and a half years or so we had been away, they had to that time incurred the largest debt of any Aboriginal store in the Northern Territory — a mere \$250,000. We said, first of all, we needed a break, and as the Lajamanu store was then out of debt and the needs of Yuendumu seemed more pressing, we left Lajamanu. We then set off for a trip to Singapore, Sumatra, Malaysia and the Philippines, after which we returned home to Adelaide. Three weeks after our return, Sam phoned again and soon we were on our way back to Yuendumu.

CHAPTER 26

RETURN TO YUENDUMU

NOVEMBER 1981—NOVEMBER 1982

Before leaving Adelaide, we called on the General Manager of one of the warehouses to which the Yuendumu store was heavily in debt, \$57,000 to be precise. The General Manager asked us how we thought we could ever recoup the money and repay their debt. We told him that what really was needed was another \$15,000 credit to be able to restock the clothing section, thereby increasing sales and profits. He had great faith in our integrity and ability and even though some of his own staff apparently thought he had temporarily taken leave of his senses, he granted our request.

On our return, as per usual, the store and house were absolutely filthy! Glen was obliged immediately to go to Alice Springs for a creditors' meeting where the Aboriginal Development Commission gave a guarantee on a \$60,000 bank loan and the creditors were promised by Glen and the Commission that within three years, all the debts would be totally cleared. Happily for the creditors, it was a great challenge for Glen and me to keep this promise and, by working seven days per week, we achieved the desired result in a third of the time, just twelve months. At that time, we were not employed by the Yuendumu Social Club but instead, were under the auspices of the Aboriginal Development Commission. Whilst the debt was being recouped, the committee of the Social Club had no powers over day-to-day management.

Even though it was such hard work, I was glad to return to Yuendumu as it was a large store, catering for the needs of well over a thousand people. At that time, weekly takings would have averaged over \$40,000, and as the store's financial position improved, buying became quite an exciting event. We felt that some of the Aboriginal girls on the staff, who had worked so hard and helped us get the store out of debt, should be rewarded and as there was great camaraderie amongst the staff members in general, I decided I would take four of those who had contributed the most on a similar trip to that of Helen from Maningrida. We planned to visit Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide, and once again go sight-seeing, visit factories, warehouses and shops. Firstly, I took Norma and Beverly, then Alice and Norah. We stayed at excellent four-star hotels in Brisbane and Sydney — the

girls having their own room with an interconnecting door in case they were nervous or needed help at any time. After the basic type of accommodation they had been used to, they could not believe the luxurious facilities available, especially en-suite bathrooms and toilets and mini bars.

On these trips it was an all expenses paid occasion, but the girls were asked to supply most of their own personal spending money for their shopping. They all saved hard and each had approximately \$400, which I had held in the safe for them, so an hour before our departure time, I handed them their money as I felt they should have the freedom to spend it as they wished. Several days after we had left Yuendumu, Beverly was buying up and I asked Norma what she had purchased with her money. I could hardly believe it when she told me she did not have the \$400 I had given her the hour before we left, because in that time she had played cards and lost the lot!! Fortunately, I was able to help out to a degree. On the day we were leaving Yuendumu to go on this trip, I scratched my leg on a piece of wire and the spot became so badly infected that I needed to visit the Royal Adelaide Hospital for treatment. The girls loved this opportunity of going into town on their own.

At the beginning of our trip, we were driven from Yuendumu by a local policeman in his private car. He dropped us at the Territory Motel in Alice Springs, where we were to spend two nights. Unbeknown to me, the Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser, and his entourage were staying at the same motel. I went inside to check in whilst Beverly and Norma, who were looking very clean and well dressed, waited outside with the luggage. The girls were guests at the motel, but a very officious, racist police officer, who was on duty there, told them to move away as they had no business to be near there. I was really annoyed and reported the act to the policeman who had driven us the 300 kilometres from Yuendumu to Alice Springs.

After our departure from Yuendumu, Beverly left the store and joined the Community Council office staff where she became responsible for the handing out of Social Service cheques to approximately 400 people each fortnight, as well as helping to fill in Unemployment Benefit forms and giving assistance and advice to people requiring help in these two areas. She also keeps a record of all Social Service cheques paid. Norma stayed on for a while, but she was involved in helping to establish an out-station at Chilla Wells, so she often went out bush. Alice was a very talented and attractive young woman; quite glamorous, in fact. She loved new clothes so had a ball in Sydney shops. She later joined the teaching staff at the school, but I have recently heard she is now working at the Health Clinic. Noreen, sometime previously, had re-married and gone to live in Alice Springs where I recently met her and she told me she was now working there as a teacher at Yeperenye Aboriginal school.

Norah left in our time. She was a real card-sharp; during the lunchhour on a pay day, she would often win large amounts of money. On one such

occasion, her winnings were \$3,000 and by next morning, the total was \$4,500, so she and her husband, Frank, chartered a plane for \$400 to fly them to Alice Springs where they bought two second-hand cars. At that time, Frank was unemployed and to me seemed fairly disinterested in life at Yuendumu until given the opportunity to express himself in painting and art work. He is now one of the most talented and respected artists in The Centre. Norah also took up painting and between them they had a relatively high income, especially as Frank's works often sold for thousands of dollars each. Norah and Frank also toured southern capitals with their own and other Aboriginal art works. Frank has recently returned from a trip to Norway.

I sometimes wondered if the trip down south had made any impression on these girls. When visiting Yuendumu several years later, to my surprise, Norma and Beverly started reminiscing about their trip, never missing a detail, so I felt quite pleased that in some small way I had been able to contribute in broadening their horizons, which perhaps may have made a lasting impression on them.

Over the years, Glen and I seem to have got on really well with our Aboriginal employees and they apparently enjoyed working with us, giving us terrific loyalty and support. If at any time the staff asked any questions or wanted to discuss any subject, to the best of my ability, I would try to help them. They even sought advice on AIDS, for which I tried to provide suitable answers. Conversely, the staff always seemed happy to oblige with answers to my innumerable questions about Aborigines and their lifestyle.

One pay afternoon, when the store's takings for the three hours trading would probably be in the vicinity of \$14,000-\$15,000, I asked a very pleasant young Aboriginal man on our staff if he would mind helping pack people's groceries into carry bags to hasten the operation at the check-out. To my surprise, he refused and I was not very impressed because he said that was women's work. I reminded him that the girls and I had helped unload the truck earlier in the week because he had been absent. He then, in a very uncharacteristic manner for him, slapped me across the face and, for some unknown reason, went over to his mother, who was standing nearby, and punched her in the chest. I was unharmed but was so incensed at the treatment he had handed out to his mother, I felt I had to retaliate on her behalf, so I too, in a very uncharacteristic manner, in the heat of the moment, responded with a quick kick in the shins and he fell to the ground. Later, he could not believe it when I told him that the incident was finished, I would not be calling the police and that I expected him at work the next morning. We returned to Yuendumu on several later occasions and he and I have always been the greatest of friends and he never failed to ask if he could work with us again. Where possible, we have given him employment. Norma also made similar requests.

The local people had a terrific system while shopping. At the checkout when the operator told them of the amount owing and they found they were short of the silver or, in the earlier days \$1 and \$2 notes, they would just stand there

and appeal to all and sundry for the balance of the amount owing until somebody eventually obliged. They also pocketed any change from the transaction. A few minutes later, they would tap their own resources — for women usually in their bras and for men their pockets or socks — then bring out their wad of notes and freely start their spending again.

The staff and customers alike thoroughly enjoyed the time just after the truck was unloaded to check out the new goods and clothing that had arrived. I never had any staff problems on those days, but Glen, in the food areas, was not amused to see his staff so anxiously helping me. As soon as the new clothing appeared on the shelves, both men and women would unofficially make their choices, as they did not have the money at the time, but to be sure of not missing out, they would roll up the garments into balls and hide them in every nook and cranny. I knew they were hiding the goods, but turned a blind eye to it all.

The Warlpiri women were generally proud, kind, friendly and considerate, with a wonderful sense of humour. At the same time, they must sometimes be amongst the most aggressive women in the world. They love a good fight and crowds would often gather to see the action. The subject of men was the cause of many a fracas. They would attack each other with fighting sticks about four to five centimetres in diameter and a little over a metre long, and they would really hoe into each other without fear or mercy, spurred on by some of the bystanders. If one of the victims fell to the ground, the beating still persisted unmercifully. There were an amazing number of women with broken arms in the community. From time to time they took part in a number of ceremonies for which they very artistically painted their bodies. Most of the women chew tobacco which they mix with ashes. Some of the girls become mothers at a very early age, about eleven to twelve years, so later, a mother and daughter look like sisters or, of course, if the baby is a boy, like brother and sister instead of parent and child.

The women told me that, generally, with the death of a member of the Warlpiri tribe, traditional customs and ceremonies are followed. One of these customs is that the female relatives of the deceased are obliged to get together for some days in Sorry Camps where they sit in their skin groups to wail and mourn the departed. Their faces are streaked with white clay. They also gather small branches of eucalypt and go throughout the community and buildings, often bare-breasted, sweeping away the evil spirits in all the places the deceased had previously frequented. Women who are very close relatives also have to have their hair cut very short and are only allowed to speak in whispers or sign language. Some of these women, depending on their relationship, have to spend weeks or months in isolation and, should another close relative die during that period, many more weeks of seclusion may become necessary.

Aborigines also have traditional methods of determining the cause of death and the person responsible. If the traditional methods fail to locate the culprit

and the deceased person is a known drinker, alcohol may be proclaimed the cause or, in other cases, medical reasons will suffice. As in the Top End, traditional medicine men are often consulted. In the past, sorry cuts used to be inflicted with knives by women on themselves but, thankfully, at Yuendumu and Lajamanu, that practice seems to have been eliminated. Glen and I were given Aboriginal skin names but did not exercise the privileges because we were working with and for all skin groups.

Out from Yuendumu are several quite scenic drives. One of my favourites was the Ngalikalon or Emu Dreaming which is Darby's homeland. After seeking his permission, we would set off on the 30 kilometre drive. Dr Mary Lauchren, then a linguist at Yuendumu, told me the Dreamtime story of the area; the full story appears in an Aboriginal Studies publication, *Yuendumu Doors*. One can quite picture how this story evolved because of all the interesting rock formations in the area. As it was off the beaten track, we were often able to enjoy this fascinating area without the input of tourists.

North of Yuendumu were several cattle stations, Mount Dennison and Coniston being two of the closest. From my youth, I had vaguely heard of the Coniston Massacre, but it was not until Sam Miles, who at the time was working for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, kindly lent me John Cribben's book, *The Killing Times*, that I truly began to be aware of the events that actually took place in the Northern Territory in the early 1920s. I was appalled to read of white man's inhumanity to Aboriginal people and was also surprised to find that the Alex Wilson mentioned in that book was none other than the Alex Wilson at Yuendumu. As a twenty-year old part-Aboriginal tracker, he had been on a camel, patrolling the area around Coniston Station at the very time of the massacre.

Randal Stafford, who was also mentioned in the book, was the owner of Coniston Station. When I was a child in Adelaide, our family was invited to the home of a neighbour, Mrs Gebhardt, to meet her brother who was down on leave from the Northern Territory with his Aboriginal wife and two daughters. He turned out to be none other than Randal Stafford.

During 1982, I was told that \$3.5 million in Department of Social Security cheques, Unemployment Benefits, tax refunds and wages went into Yuendumu. Usually, the bigger the cheque the less the store saw of it as Alice Springs, 300 kilometres away, is virtually just around the corner to Aboriginal people. With few jobs and such harsh, desolate surroundings, and in many ways with the hopelessness and frustrations of the place, most people of any race would be depressed. Is it any wonder that in places like Alice Springs, Darwin, Tennant Creek and Katherine, the Aboriginal population is increasing. In the towns, at least there are green lawns to sit on and in some cases a better range of goods to buy in the shops. Unfortunately, there is also easy access to hotels and alcohol.

Some of the older Aboriginal people told me they are doing their best to keep their ancient culture intact, but many of the younger people are hopeful of enjoying a different life in the bigger towns and cities. This hope, I am sorry to say, more often than not turns out to be a myth. Many are taken down and cheated, returning home broke and disillusioned. Some, because of their drinking, end up in gaol. Unfortunately, too, in the towns, many Aboriginal women are picked up and used by some rather poor types of white men. It used to sadden me to see some of these men arriving in a community, supposedly as guests of the women, just sitting down or lolling about awaiting the arrival of their next Unemployment Benefits cheque.

Because Yuendumu had been declared a dry area, the police would patrol the border entrances and confiscate any liquor found in a vehicle, perhaps charging the driver and maybe some of the passengers as well. Even then, a great deal of alcohol still managed to get into the community. Some of the young men would boast they had made three grog runs to Alice Springs in the one day. To do that they must have driven at excessive speeds: the number of accidents on that particular stretch of road was tragic.

The Football Club owned a bus and, on one occasion, the team went to play a match at another community. On their return, a bottle of alcohol was discovered in one of the player's bags. The bus was impounded by the police and later, at a Court hearing, the Magistrate awarded it to the local Baptist Church. Of course, the person responsible for the incident should have been charged and punished, but to me it seemed a very harsh penalty for the whole of the football team to be penalised in this way for the wrongful action of just one team member.

Jeanie, a fully-qualified Aboriginal school teacher, who was a teetotaler, bought a brand new station-wagon. Her son, also a non-drinker, drove it to Alice Springs. On the return journey, they picked up one of the local Yuendumu men and asked him if he had any grog in his bag. He said, 'No', but on arrival at the boundary gate, they were apprehended by the police who found one can of liquor in the passenger's bag. Jeanie's vehicle was confiscated and allowed to deteriorate in the police station yards for about six months. She told me that for months she constantly phoned and wrote to the authorities. Finally, they relented and she received her vehicle back. Most confiscated vehicles are sold; in Jeanie's case it was probably because of her education that she was able to relentlessly pursue her cause to a satisfactory conclusion.

As in the Top End, football, basketball, hunting and card playing are the main pastimes for men, whilst the women used some of their spare time playing softball, basketball, hunting and again the ubiquitous card playing. Even the children gamble on a game of throwing coins into a hole. Petrol sniffing at one stage was quite prevalent but, due to the efforts of some of the local Aboriginal men in consultation with some European organisations, thankfully, this practice has evidently been stamped out at Yuendumu.

Gardening is done in a small way, but it is pretty hard work in such harsh conditions, especially as no rain falls for months at a time.

For over twenty years, the Yuendumu community has held Annual Sports Weekends, usually in early August, incorporating the Picnic Day holiday. They play host to many Aboriginal sports persons from all over the Northern Territory, northern South Australia and across the Western Australian border. Usually there are several thousand visitors for that carnival and there is great rivalry, especially between the teams from Papunya, Lajamanu and Yuendumu. Anybody who is game enough to umpire the football matches deserves a medal, as making a wrong decision would cause tempers to flare.

In 1982, whilst we were managing the Yuendumu store, they had one of their largest crowds, approximately 5,000 people. Our Aboriginal staff wanted to participate in some of the events or just give vocal support to their local players and teams which, of course, meant Glen and I were alone in the store to service this enormous crowd. Over the weekend, we punched through \$100,000 on the cash registers and our arms were so tired we could hardly lift them to take another cent. Football teams came from near and far and expected to be outfitted with their appropriate jumpers, shorts, socks and boots. Fortunately, we were this time well organised, as we had on a previous occasion only just arrived and were quite unprepared for the immensity of this event.

A Housing Association, which was reputed to be the best in the Centre, was where a number of Aborigines were employed by a European manager. There were also a European bricklayer and a carpenter. A great deal of money and time has been spent on very basic housing, plans which I felt should have been scrapped years before, as they were so inadequate. The type of housing has since been upgraded. Solar hot water systems are now used to great advantage. I have recently heard that a new style of toilet has been devised for Aborigines living in some areas of the bush which should be of great benefit.

The community-run Walpiri Media at Yuendumu, employed Aborigines and helped to produce segments for radio and television programs, especially with the advent in Alice Springs of CAAMA Radio Station and Imparja Television. Much interest has been expressed by Aboriginal communities and the quality of some of the programs shown is quite impressive. Much of the southern format of having so much advertising has been eliminated and replaced by health and educational segments which I am sure are a very beneficial way of getting these messages across to Aboriginal people.

The local Arts and Crafts organisation selects artists for the quality of their work and they are greatly encouraged, with most of their excellent works being sold to southern dealers, galleries and overseas markets. A number of Aborigines are employed in the Health, Education and Police Departments. Some of these people have given many years of competent and loyal service

to the organisations in which they have been employed. Their jobs are usually quite well paid, which certainly must be a great incentive for them to remain in these positions.

Having paid off the \$250,000 store debt in twelve months, Glen was approached by the Aboriginal Development Commission to see if he and I would be interested in going to Willowra Station to stock and make operational their new store. We said we would take on the job for three months, so the store manager's job at Yuendumu was advertised.

A new manager and his wife were selected to take over from Glen and me, and it was decided that they should visit Yuendumu to see if they thought they could really settle in such an isolated area. On the day of their visit, I invited them to lunch. During the course of conversation, I happened to mention I had been having trouble with the door seal of the refrigerator, which was not fitting properly, and a little field mouse which had got indoors. I opened the refrigerator to show the visitor the seal and she and I nearly fainted, as there, sitting on the bottom shelf, was the mouse. Thankfully, although she was terrified of mice, it was not enough to deter them from taking the job. We heard that, after a short term of management, they left.

Before we left, the Aboriginal store committee put on a barbecue in our honour at a lovely spot in the hills. On this day Glen and I were greatly honoured when each of us were presented with a beautifully painted shield in recognition of our services to their community and made Life Citizens of Yuendumu.

CHAPTER 27

WILLOWRA

DECEMBER 1982—MARCH 1983

The homestead of Willowra Station is situated in close proximity to the Lander River. This station property was purchased from the Parkinson family by the Aboriginal Development Commission in 1973 at a cost of \$230,000 and covers an area of 4,855 square kilometres. It is now once again home to many Warlpiri people who have kinship ties with the land. The Warlpiri tribe, who were also at Yuendumu, is numerically one of the largest and is scattered far and wide across an enormous area of the centre and mid-northern sections of the Northern Territory.

The Lander River is a very wide stream which, after occasional heavy rain, becomes a raging torrent. For most of the year, however, except for a few permanent waterholes, it is just a dry, red, sandy river bed. This river eventually peters out in the heart of the Tanami Desert.

Willowra was quite a pleasant place, with a population of about 200-250 Aboriginal people. There was also a European cattle manager and his wife, who was the nursing sister, and their three children, a school principal and four teachers.

Glen and I were told we would be living in the Homestead during our three months stay. It appeared that originally it had not been a very large residence but, over the years, a number of additional rooms had been added, finishing up with a total of thirteen, but with little ventilation and no air conditioning. The school principal said she thought we must be absolute outdoor fanatics as every evening as she passed by we were sitting on the lawns outside. We invited her to dinner one night and then she realised just how hot and unbearable it was indoors. Whilst out of doors, we were often joined by some of the older Aboriginal men, who would tell us stories of the past and their hopes for the future.

The store was financed with loan moneys from the Aboriginal Development Commission and had been constructed by builders from the Tangentyere Aboriginal Council in Alice Springs. The site chosen was requested by the local Aborigines and was approximately 0.5 kilometre from the homestead as

other new developments such as the Health Clinic and some reasonably new housing were already in that area. A little more planning and consultation might have been a good idea, as the store stood right in line with the unsealed air strip and the prevailing winds would from time to time sweep across bringing with them clouds of red dust to envelop us all. One day we had a really genuine Northern Territory dust storm which actually was quite frightening. The great bank of dust could be seen kilometres away before descending upon us with gale force, rolling, swirling, roaring and raging like a turbulent red sea, reducing visibility to nil.

The houses near the store had previously been occupied, but, because of several deaths in the community, following Aboriginal custom, they had to be vacated. Most of the people had moved to a camp site on the river bank about two kilometres away. These five homes would have cost in the vicinity of \$50,000 each. Later, others were built and the cost had escalated to \$70,000 each, but because of more deaths just before completion, they could not be occupied immediately. By the time it was all right for people to move in, the houses had been vandalised.

The store was of medium size, but adequate for the needs of this small community. Eventually, the store takings averaged \$18,000 per week. Initially, we had a busy time purchasing and stocking the shop ready for trading. The Aborigines had requested two extra rooms be built onto the store to be used as meeting places, one for the men and the other for the women. As it turned out, these additional rooms were not needed so we were glad to be able to use them for bulk storage for the shop.

Stumpy Jambajimba Martin was a strong Aboriginal leader and ruled with an iron fist. He would not allow liquor to be brought onto the station property and any found would either be tipped out or bottles rolled over by a tractor. Stumpy was a very quiet, likeable, unassuming person. He was also a Commissioner with the Aboriginal Development Commission and was often away in Canberra or other parts of Australia attending meetings and conferences. He had little formal education, but his number two wife, Sue, was a brilliant and talented young woman, so she was able to assist him a great deal. One day, as Glen was for some reason or other kneeling down, Sue, as quick as a flash, said, 'Glen, what is it, a prayer of invocation or supplication you are offering?' Stumpy had a very nice Toyota station-wagon which he drove, but in his absence, Andrea, one of his daughters, then about eleven years old, took over the wheel, driving the family to do the shopping. Her legs were too short to reach the pedals, so she had to stand up to do the job.

Stumpy was a great gambler and loved to visit the casino in Alice Springs as well as play cards at Willowra. Tragically, at the age of forty-seven he collapsed and died during a card game. It was another premature death which saddened Aboriginal and European people alike, and a great blow to the advancement of Aboriginal development in the Northern Territory.

Shortly after we arrived, which was about ten days before Christmas, Stumpy asked me if I would cater for Christmas dinner for about three hundred people; the increase in numbers being due to visitors spending Christmas at Willowra. They wanted a barbecue and also required iced Christmas cakes, balloons and sweets for the children. With only a radio-telephone in such an isolated spot and at such short notice, this was quite an undertaking. Fortunately, I was able to fulfil their wishes and we had quite a festive Christmas. Thankfully, the men and some of the women assisted with the barbecue.

Cattle stations, unfortunately, are not labour intensive, but at that time a program for the eradication of tuberculosis and brucellosis was being undertaken and provided work for Aboriginal people. Few other jobs were available.

Before the advent of the new store, a small, privately-owned shop had operated, but if people required any extras, they had to drive a considerable distance, either to Anningie Station or Ti Tree. It was at the Willowra store that we most heard the cry go up, 'There's no room', which meant there was a relationship problem. For us, this was quite frustrating as one or two of the staff had to disappear for up to 15-20 minutes at a time because certain relatives wanted to shop and, as most of the people were related, it became quite difficult on busy days.

The drive to Alice Springs was really quite pleasant along a red, sandy track through spinifex country, where Sturt's desert roses abounded. There were also round patches of green ground-cover about a metre in diameter which produced some very attractive white flowers. Clouds of red-beaked finches on the wing would dart across the sky, making quite a spectacular sight. At times, it seemed an interminable stretch of straight red road, 140 kilometres to the Hansen River, then 15 kilometres to Ti Tree, with a further 190 kilometres of bitumen to Alice Springs. Towards the Hansen River were some very rough gravelly patches. One day, whilst driving through one of the nearby gorges, I suddenly came across the body of a dead kangaroo right in the middle of the road. I swerved to try and avoid it and ended up facing the opposite way to the one I had been travelling. I was lucky as it would have been very easy to have rolled the vehicle in those gravelly conditions. At the sides of both the Yuendumu and Willowra roads were a number of artesian bores, the water being pumped into tanks by windmills. These have been a great boon to cattle and the cattle industry in general.

Good profits were made for the community and, at the end of our three months, we handed over the store to a new store manager, who had been chosen by the Aboriginal Development Commission and a consultancy firm in Perth. What a disaster; in his first six weeks, the store lost \$23,000, so his contract was quickly terminated and he was replaced by a more competent person. Thankfully, the store apparently has not had any more serious financial troubles since.

Mount Barkley, a smaller station property adjoining Willowra, was purchased by the Willowra Pastoral Company so that the two stations could run as a single enterprise. In June 1981, when they made their Land Claim for this property, it was the first time in the history of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act that Aborigines had laid claim to a pastoral lease for land which they themselves had purchased. From time to time, the station was serviced with supplies from the Willowra store. Actually, Mount Barkley, on the eastern extremity of the Tanami Desert, was Stumpy Martin's homeland, so his body was taken back there for burial.

After our busy times at both Yuendumu and Willowra, Glen and I decided we really needed a good break, so bought two around-the-world air tickets with Qantas and TWA and set off for six months, first to the Philippines, Hong Kong, Thailand, Greece, Israel, Egypt, Italy, England, Scotland and Wales, then had an extra six weeks travelling by train on the Continent, visiting France, West Germany, East Berlin, Austria, Luxembourg, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland, as well as Spain and Portugal. From Portugal, we flew direct to New York, then spent another four weeks crossing America and travelling as far south as Miami, San Diego and Mexico, as well as north to Canada, where we visited Vancouver and the Niagara Falls.

The highlights of the American trip were undoubtedly our visits to New York and the Grand Canyon, which, over many centuries, has been carved out by the waters of the Colorado River. Flying below the rim on a perfect day was indescribable and has to be experienced to be appreciated.

We had a five-day rest in Honolulu and then flew back to Adelaide.

CHAPTER 28

ALICE SPRINGS

NOVEMBER 1983—NOVEMBER 1985

Shortly after our return to Adelaide, the phone rang and the caller was Mike Shegog, Regional Director of the Aboriginal Development Commission in Alice Springs, asking Glen if he would be interested in joining the staff of that organisation as a Stores' Adviser. After talking it over with me, it was decided that Glen would accept the position. This, of course, meant we would be living in Alice Springs, quite a change from our previous stints in the bush.

Glen's area of responsibility was immense; north to Tennant Creek, east to the Queensland border, west to Kintore and several communities over the Western Australian border, and in the south, several communities over the South Australian border. With his love, however, of the Territory and retail stores, particularly in the bush, it was a very interesting two years spent with that organisation. Because of the isolation of so many of these communities, much of Glen's travel was done by light aircraft to conserve time and also for comfort. Being able to fly at fairly low altitudes made these trips interesting as the bush could be observed over a very broad spectrum.

I was not employed by the Aboriginal Development Commission but, because of my experience in stores, was often invited on a voluntary basis to share these trips and help with the innumerable stocktakes and store re-arrangements necessary to increase the viability of some of these businesses. To fly over the area of the Finke River, which is reputed to be the oldest river in the world, always left me with a feeling of awe. In direct contrast, we also flew over Pine Gap, the American Communications Base. Further west, the innumerable rows of mountainous red sand dunes were a fascinating sight, as were the McDonnell Ranges, including Mount Sonder and Mount Liebig. On several other occasions when Glen was busy elsewhere, I was invited to fly to Ernabella situated in the Musgrave Ranges in the north of South Australia. I will never forget the wild flowers which were blooming in great profusion, they were truly magnificent.

The problem in the Ernabella store was that of over-stocking with unsuitable clothing which had been there for years. It could not even be given away. I

helped the manager sort and pack it and rather incongruously, sold it cheaply to a white organisation in Alice Springs.

Aborigines living on cattle stations had a fairly precarious future as they never knew from day to day if they would be allowed to continue to remain there. Because of so much uncertainty and dissatisfaction, many meetings were held and much consultation done to try to get small excisions of land from areas under pastoral leases for these people to have as a permanent home. Many pastoralists were incensed and would not agree, mainly because they seemed to have a great deal to lose, especially financially. They knew that Aborigines wanted to establish their own stores on these areas, and also, no longer wanted to be subservient to station owners or managers for the receipt and changing of their cheques. I visited a number of stations and saw for myself some of the exorbitant prices being charged at their stores. We heard that some station owners, on their own admission, said they made more money out of the Aboriginal people's dollar than they ever would out of their cattle sales.

Glen was responsible for getting authority to organise the building of five small stores on station property excisions. At that time, some owners and pastoralists would not permit any Europeans to take up residence to help organise these stores. The main reason for this was that they felt, rightly or wrongly, that if Aborigines ran these stores themselves, there was more hope of them going broke and their customers eventually going back to shop at the station store. To overcome this situation, a European person was employed to visit on three days a week to take supplies, open up the store for trading and train Aboriginal staff. One station owner was feeling the pinch so badly that he offered all his former customers \$200 each to return to him as customers — some did accept.

In September 1989, the Federal and Northern Territory Governments had much dialogue regarding excisions on cattle properties. Concessions were made by both parties. Hitherto, the Northern Territory Government had refused to agree with the Federal Government decision to allow Aborigines to claim excisions on stock routes. The Federal Government finally agreed that, in fact, no claims could be made on stock routes, thus an agreement was signed. This should enable infrastructures to be put into place and Government Departments to fund a much-needed range of improvements such as power, water, housing, schools, sewerage, stores and health centres.

While the store manager of the Ti Tree Station, an Aboriginal-owned station, was on holiday, I went there and worked as a relief store manager for two weeks, during which time I was the only white person there. With the manager's prior approval, I re-organised her store but unfortunately for me, I suffered for my efforts as the dust mites caught up with me and I became quite ill and had a grave-yard cough for about six weeks.

After living in Alice Springs for eighteen months, I was asked if I would be interested in opening and running a tiny Aboriginal store at Jay Creek, about 50 kilometres from Alice Springs, near Standley Chasm. This I did and, for that six months, I had one of the most delightful jobs in the Territory. For three days a week, I would buy goods from the warehouses and set off on my way to Jay Creek and then open the store for two hours. Larapinta Drive along the McDonnell Ranges has to be one of the most scenic drives anywhere. The wonderful contours of the ranges and the ever-changing colours were sheer joy to me each time I travelled in that area. Travelling through the Sierra Nevada on our way to Las Vegas and the Grand Canyon, USA, was the only desert-type scene comparable, in my experience. Of course, the snow-covered Himalayas, the Swiss Alps and the scenic mountains of Scandinavia are absolutely magnificent, but for me, are classified in a different category.

On one of Glen's trips out bush in a very remote area away from any apparent civilisation, to his surprise, from the bush appeared an Aboriginal man who flagged him down. Glen wondered what problem was going to confront him. To his amazement, the Aborigine asked if by any chance he had any sweets on board as his children had not had any for a very long time. As it happened, for about the first time in my life, I had packed some health bars in Glen's Esky which he gladly handed over to a delighted recipient.

Another project in which Glen was involved whilst at the Aboriginal Development Commission was the formation of Ngalipaku, later to be called Yanangu, an Aboriginal organisation set up to assist and advise store managers, supply relief management, give staff training and to generally help in any way possible to improve the viability of Aboriginal stores. Later, it was to establish its own warehouse with money, minimally \$10,000 per store, contributed by a number of community stores. This business is still successfully operating in Alice Springs in opposition to firms like G & R Wills and Conway Agencies. Hopefully, in the near future, it will be able either to move to new premises nearer the city or have its present buildings upgraded. Yanangu Winkiku, in Alice Springs, is another Aboriginal organisation whose predominant role is training Aboriginal staff members of community stores.

CHAPTER 29

UTOPIA

FEBRUARY—APRIL 1985

Utopia Station was purchased by the Aboriginal Development Commission in 1974 for the 655 Aboriginal people living on fifteen out-stations or small communities in the area. It covered an area of 2,400 square kilometres and was to be operated as a viable cattle station. It had its administration centre at Atikirra, known as Three Bores.

Because of the number of different places, as well as the number of different language groups involved, intense animosity and dissension sometimes occurred. Probably the fact that they never got on well was the cause of so many splinter groups forming in the first place. The North-Western groups were able to shop at the European-owned Amaroo Station store, and all other groups wished to do their shopping in a similar manner, or preferably have their own store on their own community. Many communities at that stage were serviced by hawkers, some of whom were quite good, but others were rip-off merchants. After much consultation and collaboration with the Aboriginal Development Commission, they came up with the idea of a community store being built on Crown Land along the Sandover Highway, 257 kilometres north-east of Alice Springs and 50 kilometres from Three Bores. This was the first store of its type to be built outside a community and should have avoided any jealousies by not being built on anybody's tribal land: in fact, there was no community at all in that particular area, so there was no reason for anybody to complain. A grant of \$240,000 was given by the Aboriginal Development Commission. We felt it would have been a much better proposition to have made some of this money a loan so that the community and store manager could be more accountable to the Aboriginal Development Commission, but that was not to be.

Because the store was so isolated, extra costs were incurred for the installation of services such as water, power, sewerage and a manager's residence, which were all essential. This meant the involvement of many Government Departments and local bodies. Without consultation, an Aboriginal woman with some authority in the area contacted some of these organisations and told them that there had been a change of plan and the store site had been shifted 6 kilometres east of the original site. She concealed the

fact that this spot was right next door to her relatives' land. This alteration was not discovered until the store building was well under way and, of course, this caused a great deal of dissatisfaction amongst the other families. From a practical point of view, it was a ridiculous place as the prevailing winds constantly swept across the sandy highway, bringing clouds of dust to envelop the store.

Prior to the building of the store, it seemed that the people of Utopia had seen little of the government's largesse. It also seemed that Self-Determination had eluded the area, as some very paternalistic European staff at Three Bores attempted to play God to these people, making decisions contrary to the Aborigines' wishes.

The plans for the store had been put in place before Glen joined the Aboriginal Development Commission, and, shortly before it was completed, Glen and I were asked if we would be interested in getting the store operational, so, out to Utopia we went to view the situation. For some unknown reason, we said yes and Glen took leave from the Aboriginal Development Commission. There was no house and parts of the Sandover Highway were extremely rough, as the dirt road had not been graded for months. In fact, the drive to Utopia was quite hazardous.

At Three Bores Administration Centre, the Aboriginal Development Commission were told that for the moment they would supply a caravan for the manager's accommodation until such time as some of the cattle were mustered and sold, thus generating money for a demountable house. Had the Aboriginal Development Commission done its homework properly, they would have discovered that all the cattle had long since vanished, so no local finance was available. Glen and I arrived at Utopia in February 1985, and found that the caravan had been installed under one of the few gum trees in the area. There were dead mice on the table and, apart from that, it did not look too clean and the door would not lock. With so little security in such an isolated area and because of the heat, I refused to live in the caravan and said I would prefer to live in the back of the store. I drove to Alice Springs and bought a few sticks of second-hand furniture and a couple of mattresses, and we dosed down on the hard cement floor with the noise and hot air from the refrigerator engines as our constant companions. The weather was extremely hot each day in the mid to high forties! To touch the inside shop walls in the late evenings would burn one's hands. Eventually, a small air conditioner was made available, but was of little value in such extremely unbearable conditions.

Kevin Bourne-Macrae, his wife Heather, and some of the European staff from Three Bores ably assisted in the unloading of the truck with our initial store supplies and helped with the stacking of the shelves, and after a few days, the store was ready to open for trade. I have rarely been so tired in my life as, with the intense heat, sleep was impossible and I began to feel that instead of being at Utopia, I had been misdirected to The Other Place.

We had no radio or telephone; a vehicle was our only contact with the outside world. As previously mentioned, the nearest Europeans were 50 kilometres away and Aborigines had been told they were not to live in the store area. After the store was officially opened, the distribution and changing of cheques took place there. We opened the store seven days a week and people flocked from near and far to do their shopping and to enjoy the choice fresh fruits, meat, bread and other goods, as well as the cold drinks and ice-creams. They also enjoyed the clothing, of which there was a better range than previously available to them, as well as being so much cheaper. Glen and I always worked on the principle that by lowering your percentage mark-up, your turnover increased and profits automatically did likewise.

A few Aborigines decided to camp near the store for our protection. At any time in the night, if a vehicle approached, the Aborigines flashed their torches to check on the occupants. For this we were most grateful. At about 10 o'clock one night, a vehicle did arrive and we were surprised when the Aboriginal occupants said they had just driven 100 kilometres as earlier in the evening they had won \$1,000 at cards. Before they lost it again or their relatives had a chance of taking it from them, they wanted to spend the lot, which they proceeded to do to the last cent.

I have travelled the world fairly extensively and the only place I can recall seeing flies in such plague proportions as at Utopia was at a stinking, revolting rubbish dump at Delhi in India, where there were millions. At Utopia, the flies formed a moving screen at the door. They settled on people's backs and were carried into the shop. It was a full-time job with a fly spray.

Dr Toby McLeay was the resident medical officer at Utopia. He had been there for a number of years and was a very dedicated medico, especially interested in nutrition and had most people on a diet, which included dried fruits and nuts. While we were there, he went on leave, just wandering through the bush on a camel.

The women, mainly in the Three Bores area, were most artistic and produced some of the best quality and most attractive Batik in the country.

Most evenings were spent out of doors under the stars, trying to avoid the extreme heat indoors and, of course, with no telephone or television, there was little else one could do but sit gazing at the stars. I often wished I had been more attentive when watching the television series by Dr Carl Sagan, an eminent American astrophysicist, whose programs were of a scientific and astrophysical nature. In the pristine, unpolluted air of Utopia, the sky was ablaze with planets, stars, constellations and galaxies.

One evening, just at dusk, some Aborigines from one of the small Aboriginal communities some kilometres up the road arrived to plug in a television set and video recorder to the store's power supply as there was no electricity

where they lived. People then started arriving from all directions, looking forward to the evening's entertainment. Suddenly everybody began to disappear and a car came racing down the road at great speed. We commented on how crazy anybody would have to be to drive so fast on such a rough road, but were soon to learn there had been an accident about a kilometre away involving some Aboriginal people. One person was dead and the driver and three passengers injured. Out of the blue, the injured were brought to the store and so, with no communication, Glen decided the only thing to do was to drive the 50 kilometres to Three Bores to get medical assistance. The body of the dead person was being looked after by some Aboriginal people. When Glen left, I was alone with the four injured people. Fortunately, we had mattresses, pillows and blankets in the store. Even though it was a very hot night, the blankets were necessary as all the injured were in a state of shock. One man was delirious and had blood gushing from a deep wound in his head, so I used some water and packets of towelling nappies to help stem the flow of blood. As far as I could see, the others did not seem to have many visible serious injuries, but all were complaining of internal pains and headaches. After a while, they all settled down and then, for the next two hours, I sat alone with my four patients in the middle of nowhere. All the Aboriginal people had vanished, all other Europeans were 50 kilometres away and Glen was on his way to get help. On that occasion, I am glad to say, I seemed able to take everything in my stride and was able to cope. In fact, as I sat there alone, I had to smile to myself about being caught in such an odd situation. Glen eventually arrived with two nursing sisters and several other vehicles. The mattresses and patients were loaded and driven to the Alice Springs Hospital, 257 kilometres away. As a result, a small radio was installed in the shop, so at least we had some form of communication, inadequate though it was.

The Aboriginal Development Commission eventually gave a grant of money for a demountable home to be built as a manager's residence. Later, one of the European staff from Three Bores arrived to show me the site where it was to be erected. I just could not believe it; it was right next door to the noisy power generator. With thousands of square kilometres of vacant land in the area, why, I asked, did it have to be there? As we had spent so much time out of doors, we were well aware that there was only one position for it to escape the ghastly generator noise and that was to put the shop between the residence and the power house. I was told that was impossible because, on the store plan, it revealed, for some obscure reason, that some toilets inside the shop entrance were listed as public toilets. Can you imagine what a health hazard that would have been in all the heat and with all the flies in a small store to have public toilets practically at the check-out! As far as we were concerned, they would be locked and used for staff only. Nevertheless, I was told to forget about my plan as the Health Department would not approve of it. Undaunted, I drove the 257 kilometres to Alice Springs to see the Chief Health Inspector, who, thankfully, could see my point of view and the wisdom of my proposal. He was furious with the people from Three Bores who had constantly ignored his correspondence on the subject. Shortly after,

I could not believe my eyes when the contractors arrived to put in the pylons and foundations at the power house site. Again I remonstrated and told them of the Health Department's decision and showed them the only feasible site. They were not amused and neither was I, so off back to Alice Springs they went. A few days later, back they came and started operations at a spot a little nearer the appropriate site, but still in line with the noise. Again I pointed out the stupidity of their actions and that, if in future the store wanted to attract and retain a manager, the dwelling should be properly sited. Once again they downed tools and went back to Alice Springs. I never saw the house as we only stayed seven weeks, but later we heard that after our departure, due to all my endeavours, my original plan was eventually acceded to.

Once, while driving to Alice Springs, which unfortunately I had to do because of having no communication and our orders had to get there to be processed in time for delivery, I was picked up by a radar gun, just as I entered the outskirts of Alice Springs. I was travelling at 73 kilometres in a 60 kilometres zone. I must admit that, after the bush, I was so intent on the traffic I had failed to even see the 60 kilometres sign. When I told the police officer I had driven from Utopia along the rough Sandover Highway, he was very understanding and let me off, deeming that to have done that trip was punishment enough.

We made a net profit of \$35,000 in our short stay at Utopia and things were going well so all hawkers were banned from the area. Later, with several changes of management, things altered and the hawkers came back. Some managers were very irresponsible, going off for days at a time, leaving inexperienced Aboriginal staff in charge. Under supervision they were fine, with their relations putting pressure on them with threats of reprisals, and often not knowing the correct prices, the store eventually went broke.

A hawker's van had been purchased before our arrival, to be used in conjunction with the store, but we were not at all keen to put it on the road as we felt the main issue at that stage was to get the store really established properly. After we left, the scheme was tried but failed, so the outside hawkers came back. Amazing as it may seem, at one stage, we heard, one of these hawkers owed the store \$42,000 and put it well on the road to liquidation. The hawker's credit had run out in Alice Springs, so the store manager gave his mate, the hawker, the Utopia store order book to use, running up the \$42,000 debt!

If store managers have the proper expertise and integrity, hawkers are not needed as people will always find ways and means of travelling to the shop; in fact, they enjoy the outing and social experience. Even a medium-sized bus would have been a better proposition than the hawker's van.

CHAPTER 30

ALI-CURUNG

NOVEMBER 1988—JANUARY 1989

Glen and I were asked if we could help out as relief managers for John and Barbara Hoare at the Warrabri Co-operative Store at Ali-Curung, 170 kilometres south of Tennant Creek. Their holidays were due and they wanted to take a two-month break.

I was told I could either have a job in the store or do the cooking for the take-away food outlet. If I preferred the first job, there was another European woman on the staff who would be happy to do the cooking. Unfortunately, there was in fact no choice, as a few days before our arrival, this woman's husband's job was terminated and they both had to leave the community. As it was school holidays, there were not any other available Europeans, and Aboriginal girls had not been trained to do the cooking. I believe in the past some had done the cooking and an Aboriginal woman was badly burnt with hot fat splashing up into her face.

Ali-Curung was frequently listed as the hottest place in the Northern Territory; often it was 46° outside and must have been well in the 50's in the kitchen. I was to cook over 1,000 chickens in the eight weeks, plus countless hamburgers, sausages, hot dogs, fillets of fish, and it seemed millions of chips, whilst three Aboriginal girls did the selling.

On the staff there was also an Aboriginal man who attended to the bulk store and organised the re-stocking of the store shelves as well as selling fuel, whilst Glen was responsible for the overall management.

During our time at Maningrida, we had become acquainted with the fact that if Aboriginal Co-operative Stores were liquidated and changed their name to either a Progress Association or a Social Club, they would then be placed in a different category for taxation purposes. There would be no individual shareholding but instead the store would be wholly owned by the community with all profits being poured back there for the benefit of all, and there would be an exemption from payment of taxation. Warrabri store at Ali-Curung is still a co-operative and the few remaining shareholders have decided not to

make any change, so each financial year approximately half of the profits get paid to the Taxation Office.

The Aboriginal Development Commission had funded this comparatively new store under unusual circumstances. Originally, most residents were shareholders, but with the passing of time, their numbers had greatly decreased, with the result there is now only a minority of shareholders owning the Co-operative. Warrabri is now the only Aboriginal Co-operative Store in the Northern Territory. A privately-owned bakery and after-hours food store was being run by a non-Aboriginal family.

After nearly twenty years in the bush, Ali-Curung was the first community in which we lived that actually had a telephone and a television, which was like a dream. In many places now, satellite links for telephones are used by Telecom. We were also able to drive 170 kilometres to Tennant Creek on several Sundays and enjoy somebody else's cooking, especially at The Dolly Pot Inn.

Due to the efforts of the local Member of Parliament, Ian Tuxworth, the standard of housing at Ali-Curung was infinitely superior to other communities such as Yuendumu, and generally, the occupants seemed to take pride in keeping the houses in reasonable condition.

CHAPTER 31

BARUWEI REVISITED

FEBRUARY—MARCH 1989

We were quite enjoying our retirement in Adelaide after leaving Ali-Curung but, because Glen greatly enjoys the Northern Territory, he rarely says no to an opportunity of returning there for a short break, either as a consultant or a relief store manager.

After twenty years of Northern Territory life, to him, suburbia seems so confining and inconsequential. To his surprise, a phone call came from Colin Black, the recently appointed Regional Director of the Aboriginal Development Commission in Darwin. He had been a senior staff member of the Aboriginal Loans Commission in Canberra at the time Baruwei was initially established in Katherine and had at times represented that organisation at Baruwei's Directors' meetings. He had now inherited that Company's many problems.

Colin explained to Glen that Baruwei needed a temporary manager because the incumbent manager had given notice that he would be leaving Baruwei in a few weeks to take up a new appointment. When it was found this person's new appointment was to be in Katherine with an opposition warehouse, based in Darwin but soon to be opening a branch in Katherine, the Aboriginal Development Commission demanded his immediate resignation. Glen agreed to help out until a new manager was employed.

Like a great many Aboriginal organisations, Baruwei had been subjected to violent fluctuations of viability ranging from considerable success to the depths of financial difficulties, depending on the expertise of the incumbent management. All managers at Baruwei have been non-Aborigines, but, because it is an Aboriginal organisation, the blame for its problems has often been wrongly attributed to Aborigines.

The Baruwei warehouse was initially situated in an excellent site in Pearce Street, Katherine, close to the main business sector in the centre of town, with ample room for parking and expansion. One manager, however, convinced the Directors, who were able successfully to convince the Aboriginal Development Commission, that a new warehouse was necessary. At a cost of

\$600,000 plus interest, a new warehouse was built several kilometres out of town, where the supposed new business development was eventually to take place. The new complex had everything; the Board Room was considered to be the best in the Northern Territory. Computers and facsimile machines were installed and, of course, there was a massive debt to pay back. These difficulties were compounded by the fact that they were unable to attract any reasonable offer for the original warehouse complex. It was hard to see why the Aboriginal Development Commission ever approved the application as the move defied all business logic and turned out to be a monumental blunder.

During another period of bad management the manager's and assistant manager's residences were sold and replaced with two more up-market homes. On another occasion, the manager and an accountant on Baruwei's staff established their own private bakery as a sideline and charged their necessary purchases either directly or indirectly through Baruwei. The bakery went broke, with a result that Baruwei sustained a loss of \$170,000. This scandal was much publicised in the Northern Territory newspapers. The Board surely had been very remiss indeed in allowing senior staff to have such a conflict of interests. Under this same management, Baruwei had built and opened a retail store in another new development area at Katherine East, designated as the new growth area for housing. This was on the way to the RAAF Base at Tindal. With all the hype about the building of this Air Base 15 kilometres from Katherine, the expectations of many businesses were overrated and over-extended. Many have since gone into liquidation.

For some inexplicable reason, this new store operation was to have a 50-50 partnership between the organisation and a private entrepreneur, who owned the land on which the store was built. The store building was paid for by a loan from the Aboriginal Development Commission. This further compounded Baruwei's debt level. At about the same time, Woolworths opened a 14-check-out supermarket in the main street of Katherine, which impacted strongly against Baruwei's store operation.

It seemed quite unethical in a small town for a warehouse such as Baruwei to open a retail store in opposition to its own customers. The store was established in Katherine East before the actual development of the area and, at that time, a small delicatessen would have been all that was required. Baruwei also was not in a sufficiently strong financial position to tide it over this establishment period. It seemed inconceivable that the Aboriginal Development Commission allowed Baruwei to actually go into partnership with a non-Aboriginal business. It certainly proved a very costly mistake. The owner of the land was an entrepreneur with many irons in the fire; some of his projects failed and he went into receivership, so the land was repossessed by his bank. The store, of course, went broke, and for several years there was a stalemate between the bank and the Aboriginal Development Commission. During this time, costly rental was being paid on massive refrigeration lying idle in the store, as it had been leased under a

long-term contract. The bank's interest has now been sold to a former store manager from one of the Aboriginal communities. The last setback was not the only one when the entrepreneur went into receivership, as, apart from anything else, he also owed Baruwei approximately \$90,000.

When Glen returned to this organisation, he was given to understand it was going reasonably well and so it should after the massive amounts of money which had been poured into it. The original Aboriginal Development Commission loan for its establishment was \$500,000. Over the succeeding years until 1988, the Aboriginal Development Commission had contributed further large sums of money, to the point that, when Glen took over, he found that Baruwei's current debts to that organisation were \$2.9 million. It would appear that perhaps, at Board meetings, former managers may not have stated the true financial position of the Company. This reflected badly on Board members. It was disclosed in the Northern Territory newspapers that one of these managers was subsequently charged and had to face Court proceeding.

One local business had Baruwei as its Katherine distributor and, as soon as Glen arrived, a representative from this firm was on the phone asking for an immediate cheque for \$70,000 for overdue debts. For days after, the phone kept ringing with about thirty creditors making similar requests for varying amounts. Glen immediately contacted the Aboriginal Development Commission and reported the situation as, understandably, all the creditors were threatening to cut off supply and Baruwei's bank balance was practically nil. The Aboriginal Development Commission contacted the Directors, who were stunned at the situation, especially as an Aboriginal Development Commission adviser had been flown from Canberra to Katherine to attend most Board meetings to monitor the Company's financial position. So, instead of Glen just holding the fort for a few weeks, he was well and truly in the firing line of all the creditors.

An outside accounting firm was hired to look into this diabolical situation. A stocktake was done, which revealed a significant amount of unsaleable stock. Even so, with stock and assets, Baruwei should have been in a reasonable position if all its own customers had paid their accounts on time. Baruwei owed, in round figures, \$800,000, was owed \$800,000 and had \$800,000 in stock, some of which was not saleable. Much of the money owed to Baruwei was not recoverable because a number of businesses had folded. The Aboriginal Development Commission having, in 1988, poured \$1 million into the business, understandably refused to prop it up any longer, so Voluntary Provisional Liquidation was sought through the Courts.

Common sense would have suggested that Baruwei should have been fully liquidated. However, because the Aboriginal Development Commission had first mortgage over Baruwei's assets and though the total return would not nearly have paid off the debt to the Aboriginal Development Commission, the Commission, nevertheless would have been entitled to all the money

realised, leaving the suppliers with absolutely nothing. Under Provisional Liquidation, Baruwei was given the opportunity to trade out of its debts.

I had stayed in Adelaide for most of the time Glen was in Katherine, but later decided to spend a three-week holiday there. On the day I was due to arrive in Darwin en route to Katherine, Glen had word that the traditional land owner from Maningrida had died and Glen was offered a seat on a charter flight to attend his funeral. Unfortunately, he was unable to attend, but a week or so later, he arrived home from work to say that Peter Cooke, another former Maningridan then working with the Northern Land Council, had rung to say that the Northern Land Council was meeting in Katherine and we were both invited to a barbecue with all the Land Council members that evening. We had a very pleasant time renewing acquaintances with some Aboriginal friends, including the dead man's brother, Joseph. Glen and I were just unobtrusively sitting at a table with Peter and some of the Aborigines, when others would come up and give me a hug or kiss. There were also some other Europeans at the venue not connected with the Northern Land Council barbecue. Later in the evening, one of these men came up to me and said he had been watching the events of the evening and was so intrigued about the reasons for my unsolicited popularity. I was quickly able to explain that we had known a number of these people over a twenty-year period, so he went away with his curiosity well satisfied.

When I visited Baruwei and saw the quantities of unsaleable stock in the clothing section, I suggested to Glen that, on a voluntary basis, I would help to dispose of some of the goods which were quite unsuitable for Aboriginal stores. So for two weeks Baruwei rented a shop in the main street and we disposed of the lot, generating quite an amount of ready cash.

Glen only intended to be in Katherine for a few weeks and did not wish to stay on indefinitely, so he contacted a former Darwin warehouse manager, Ron Dixon, and explained the situation. Thankfully, Ron said he would be interested in accepting the challenge of getting Baruwei back on the right track, in conjunction with the Provisional Liquidator. Glen stayed for two months, during which time he helped to unravel many problems.

Appropriate staff has always been a problem in the Northern Territory because of the floating population. At that time, most of the warehouse staff were part-Aborigines, with the office staff mainly Europeans. Unfortunately, in both areas, most were very inexperienced. Our latest advice on Baruwei was that it had progressed quite well and is out of provisional liquidation and able to operate under a Scheme of Arrangement. There is also a new General Manager, Sue McKenzie, whom Glen had previously employed as the Office Manager.

CHAPTER 32

LAJAMANU REVISITED

JULY—OCTOBER 1989

Not in my wildest dreams did I ever envisage returning to Lajamanu, but whilst Glen was at Baruwei, the store manager from Lajamanu called in and asked Glen if he and I would be prepared to go back there for three months to enable him to take a break. He had spoken to the local Council and they had given their approval for our return. We said yes, and, after leaving Katherine, returned to Adelaide to get ourselves organised. We then headed north once again.

Things are never quite the same on a return visit to any place and, in some areas, we were disappointed to see more Europeans in jobs, less Aboriginal involvement and indeed Aboriginal enthusiasm seemed to have waned since our visit nine years before, when Maurice Luther, MBE, led his people. Unfortunately, his has been another premature death of an Aboriginal leader.

Certainly, in some areas there were great advancements. An Aboriginal woman is now in training for the job as the future school principal, the health workers were efficient and people of all ages were involved in art, many of their canvases being sent to Perth and other outlets for sale. Unfortunately, due to the lack of tourists and the general downturn in business during the pilots' dispute, art sales plummeted.

Since self-determination, in most communities, if an Aboriginal minister is ordained, as has been the case at Lajamanu, that is the sign for the reduction or withdrawal of European church staff. Not so at Lajamanu, where at that time there was an Aboriginal minister and his wife, a European minister and his wife, who had lived and worked there for sixteen years and were due to leave within a few months. They all belonged to the Baptist church. There was also a retired minister of the same denomination, and his wife, who were helping out for approximately two months by selling second-hand clothes. As soon as they departed, the new minister and his wife, who were eventually to take over the Baptist ministry at Lajamanu, arrived, but had to wait in the wings for five months until the departure of the incumbent minister who, apart from his religious duties, was also the Chairman of the Lajamanu Progress Association store committee. To my way of thinking, he had a

conflict of interests, as he purchased blankets on behalf of the church from a warehouse and sold them to pensioners. Exactly the same blankets were available in the community store but at a slightly cheaper price. Apparently, a suggestion had been put forward to the Aboriginal store committee requesting that the store should not be permitted to change any cheques over the value of \$200, and most pension cheques were, of course, over this amount. In the past, the store changed most cheques, but now, for the purpose of this exercise, all had to be processed through the bank, where the wife of the Baptist minister was the agent. Pensioners were then encouraged to buy a blanket by being asked to sign a withdrawal form for the amount of the price of a blanket, which they later collected from one of the church's outlets. Of course, this assured the certain sale of the church's blankets. The bank only opened from 3.00 to 5.00 pm on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, so if people had a cheque over \$200, they were not permitted to do anything about it except during the bank hours, whatever the circumstances.

Some people had cheques for \$700-\$800 and wanted to spend some of the money at the store, the logical place to shop for food, blankets, television sets and refrigerators, and they were very annoyed about the restriction placed on them. I must say that I was not too popular in certain circles when I ignored this unfair impost, especially when some of the first people to really complain were the Aboriginal members of the store committee, who said they did not agree with the idea, but did not want to make waves. Anyway, Glen and I were there to run the store in a business-like manner and felt that the store profits should not be depleted in favour of the church. This arrangement seemed to be a local initiative.

In 1981 there were 35 Europeans in residence at Lajamanu; ten years later, there were 63, many of whom are in relatively unimportant positions.

A well-equipped service station was almost ready to commence operation. It had been built with funding from contributions from store profits, a loan from the Aboriginal Development Commission, and a grant also from the same organisation. Overall, there would not have been much change out of half a million dollars. The service station had been established to help Aborigines with the purchase and maintenance of their private vehicles, and for the sale of fuel. It was hoped that the locals would get a better deal and it would also obviate the cost of the long trip to Katherine. The principle was excellent, especially as the manager was an experienced mechanic of high integrity, who planned to stay at Lajamanu for at least three years. Alas, after approximately one year, because of community problems as well as so much hassling by people demanding their cars back after the repairs had been carried out, but not having sufficient money to pay for the repairs or any necessary new parts, the mechanic's job became untenable, so he resigned and, with his wife and daughter, left the community.

At the store, our only form of communication was a radio through which we could make contact with VJY in Darwin, some of the profits from which help

to support the St John Ambulance Brigade in the Northern Territory. The operator would check our call sign, then register the number we wished to call on a computer, after which we waited our turn for our call to be connected. Often the static and turbulence made normal transmissions impossible, so the operator had to act as a go-between for our conversations and pass on messages. These operators were marvellously helpful and we did enjoy our friendly chats and the wonderful service they provided to people in the bush. Because it was a type of party-line operation and one had to keep tuned in whilst waiting for a call, it was interesting to hear many varied conversations. I tried to keep my private life off the air waves, but others were not so discreet.

Although in some areas of the Northern Territory great quantities of minerals, ore and gas have been mined and large sums of royalty moneys paid to Aborigines, the Aboriginal women at Lajamanu told me that, in some cases, the wrong recipients may have been chosen, which has led to much bitterness and disputes between members of families or between family groups. People say that when meetings were held, some of their very vocal distant relatives travelled from near and far to try to stake their claims, and often there was much avarice displayed.

As I handed out \$100 to each nominated Aboriginal woman, which was royalty money given to me for this purpose by a traditional owner of one of the mining areas near Lajamanu, some of these women, who had close ties with that particular area, were very annoyed at receiving such a pittance. One woman at first even refused to accept it; she changed her mind the next day. The majority of the \$78,000 went to the traditional owner and a few of his chosen kinsmen. He, of course, had the right to dispose of it in any manner he wished. The traditional owner told me that he wanted to establish his own out-station and, very importantly, he wanted to send his eldest son to a southern college, thus enabling him to learn about law and business management and about white man's ways so that they will be able to cope in a more knowledgeable way with future business deals. Some of the women at Lajamanu were also complaining to me about the new ways. In the past, they said, there was a more socialistic outlook whereby families and people would share and share alike, but it seems that those days are rapidly disappearing and often it is now becoming a case of everybody for themselves.

On the completion of our three months at Lajamanu, the pilots' dispute was in force so, instead of flying via Katherine on our way to Adelaide, we had to go by a charter flight direct to Alice Springs. There were five passengers and the pilot, and apparently the plane was over loaded to such an extent that the pilot was unable to gain sufficient altitude to avoid the turbulence. I felt pretty sick, but was better off than the rest of the passengers, who were all thoroughly air sick most of the way.

After this, we were able to take a break and go overseas again, visiting Russia, Roumania, Poland, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Hungary, East Germany and Czechoslovakia. How lucky we were to visit these eastern block countries before Glasnost and Peristroika, to experience passing through Check Point Charlie before the re-unification of East and West Germany and really to see the conditions under which people were living during the Communist regime — the lack of both food and general merchandise available in the shops, as well as the massive pollution in some areas. The sweeping changes which have recently occurred are almost unbelievable.

CHAPTER 33

YUENDUMU YET AGAIN

SEPTEMBER—OCTOBER 1989

Glen and I were invited to go back to Yuendumu for a few weeks, but on this occasion, I declined, so Glen went alone as the relief manager.

Doug and Jan Edwards had successfully managed the store at Yuendumu for over twelve months, so it was time for them to go on leave. A temporary store manager was appointed for that period. After a few weeks, this person decided he liked the place so much he ingratiated himself with some of the members of the store committee and convinced them that he should replace Doug as their regular store manager. On arriving back at Yuendumu after their holiday, Doug and Jan were unfairly confronted with their dismissal notices and had to leave the community. Under the new manager, in eight months, the Yuendumu Social Club was again in trouble with a record loss of \$350,000. After investments were realised, they were still in the red by approximately \$180,000. Eventually, Doug and Jan were reinstated and have since recouped the \$180,000, but could not afford to take a holiday unless they could get a relief manager like Glen, whom they can trust.

Glen was quite touched when Charlotte, who had been on our staff on a previous occasion, said, 'Gee, Glen, I'm really pleased to see that old hat of yours again, because I know you'll be under it!' Charlotte married and later had a baby daughter, Bethany, who would accompany her mother to work. Most of the time Bethany slept in a cot near Glen's office. He was instructed that should she wake, he was to take her to Charlotte's check-out where she would proceed to breast feed the baby. When finished, Glen had to put Bethany back to bed to continue her sleeping. Store management is certainly different in the bush.

Having achieved their objective of getting the store out of debt, Doug and Jan resigned to take up an appointment at Yalata, an Aboriginal community in the west of South Australia. The Yuendumu store is now being successfully managed by Ed and Marie Phillips who still appreciate having Glen take over the temporary management of the store during their holiday breaks.

In May that year I was invited to spend a three week holiday at Yuendumu and really enjoyed meeting with some of my Aboriginal friends.

CHAPTER 34

HERMANNSBURG

APRIL—AUGUST 1990

History records that in 1877, Hermannsburg was established by the Lutheran Church as the first Aboriginal mission station in the Northern Territory. It is 126 kilometres west of Alice Springs, is reached from Alice Springs by travelling along Larapinta Drive, through the rugged scenic McDonnell Ranges, passing Jay Creek en route. Some of these spectacular scenes were exquisitely captured on canvas by the well-renowned Aboriginal artist, Albert Namatjira, who was born at Hermannsburg. He died some years ago and a cairn to his memory has been erected by the Lutheran Church near the Hermannsburg turn-off. Several of his paintings take pride of place on the walls of the charming Tea Rooms in the Historic Precinct on the eastern bank of the Finke River. The Lutheran Church gave strong support to Aborigines in their endeavours to retain their lands, in the face of strong pressures from the expanding pastoral industry, and their efforts were successful.

Early in 1990, to our surprise, Glen was contacted by the newly-formed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Commission, who invited us to go to Hermannsburg to set up a new supermarket which had recently been built and had been paid for by from the community and part loan/part grant money from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Commission.

For nearly a century the Lutheran Mission had run and, in fact, still are running their own general store at Hermannsburg, with the profits in part being used to further the work of the Lutheran Mission in the community and I was told the rest was used wherever the Mission needed help. The Lutheran Mission also ran an out-station movement at a site across the Finke River.

Some Aborigines with little interest in the Mission or any other modern religion for that matter, were becoming uptight about the situation, especially as Self-Determination was being encouraged in Aboriginal communities and they felt that Hermannsburg should have its own Aboriginal community store with all the profits being poured back into the community. The President of the local Aboriginal Council wrote and thanked the Mission for their loyal support and dedicated service over such a long period and requested them to discontinue trading when the new supermarket became operational. In reply,

the Mission declined to accede to the Council's request which created a great deal of ill-feeling as well as giving rise to a situation where there are now two stores in the community when only one is necessary and only one can really be viable.

The Lutheran store building had seen better days, whereas the Aboriginal store was very modern. In a basically Lutheran community where people had shopped at the mission store all their lives, they were still very loyal and supportive of that particular store, which placed limitations on the trading potential of the new supermarket.

The majority of the local people, rightly or wrongly, saw the new store as belonging to the family of the Council President, Gus Williams, and wanted nothing to do with it, notwithstanding what goods may have been available or at what price. Apparently, for many years, there had been a long-standing and deep-rooted feud between some families in the community and also with some of the locals and out-station families.

At about the time we arrived at Hermannsburg, there was an Aboriginal death in Alice Springs and inevitable pay-backs were bound to occur. Several weeks later, two members of one of the opposing families were stabbed to death at Hermannsburg. One of the men was a very prominent person in his tribe and the other was his nephew. The former person had been a great worker for Aboriginal causes in general as well as on the local scene. There was another stabbing shortly after, but apparently this death was not attributable to the feuding families. The funeral of the first two victims brought Aborigines, VIPs and politicians travelling from near and far for the ceremony with over 100 vehicles taking part in the funeral procession. We were told that some time after the funeral, the feuding families and some members of Aboriginal organisations were to get together to try and resolve the family differences, thereby lessening the probability of more pay-backs and unnecessary deaths in their ranks.

When we accepted the position at Hermannsburg, we were clearly told that the Lutheran store was definitely closing when the new supermarket opened, and we looked forward to the challenge ahead. Had we not been misled by this information, we would never have gone to Hermannsburg at all, but having arrived, we did our best to make a success of this venture.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Commission and the Aboriginal Benefits Trust Association were supposed to be bankers for Aboriginal loans at a rate of 10%, but in this instance, because the builder of the store went broke and because of inaccurate costing and general miscalculations, there was insufficient money to complete the store. No further Aboriginal loan money was available, so a bank loan of \$50,000 at 18.75% interest, plus a 2% fee, plus incurred costs which lifted interest rates to over 21% was sought. This must rank as one of the highest rates ever to be paid by a fledgling

Aboriginal business — a direct negation of what the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Commission is all about.

In the new store at Hermannsburg, the usual preparations took place to get it operational. When we took our first look inside the store, it appeared like a steel jungle as there was twice as much racking and steel shelving as was required. Half of this had to be dismantled (in excess of \$25,000 worth) and stored in a shed because it had all been paid for and there was no refund or return. We did make efforts to try and sell it to another Aboriginal community.

This was not the only problem which confronted us, as some months before, a service station and a take-away food outlet had been built by the Council and we then found they were under our jurisdiction and were also insolvent with debts totalling \$90,000. The Council temporarily closed the service station the fuel was then sold by the supermarket staff. Apparently, the demise of the profitability of the service station and take-away was similar to that at Lajamanu — non-payment for services, and at the take-away, we were told, a number of people were eating at the take-away's expense. For various reasons, the Aboriginal staff did not wish to work at weekends, so some of the Council members' relatives from Alice Springs were recruited to keep the take-away open. Having to pay penalty rates made this a very unprofitable exercise, so, at weekends, we transferred the pie-warmer, drinks and ice-creams to the store.

Because of the burden of debts and disasters, the store could only afford a minimum of staff. They had to work the scheduled hours, although the store was open seven days a week, which meant in three months we had one day off. This was an almost impossible situation, but in our endeavour to help make a success of this venture for the local Aborigines, we were prepared to go along with it for the time being.

The store takings increased to \$20,000 per week. Actually, it became quite interesting; our staff finished work at 5.00 o'clock Monday to Friday, as did the Lutheran store staff. Glen and I, on a voluntary basis, stayed on until 5.30 pm on those days. The store also traded all day Saturday and Sunday, whilst our opposition only opened on Saturday morning. It was then quite amazing to see the opposition locals and people from out-stations come to the new supermarket to do their shopping during these extra hours. It seemed as though their loyalty to the Lutheran store was not being tested during these times and we enjoyed meeting them, and some became very good customers.

We actually had great problems in recruiting staff because the Lutheran store was staffed by five Europeans and few Aborigines, so not many local people in the community had been trained in the store area, unlike other Aboriginal communities. Consequently, there was not a reservoir of experienced store workers available, and we were not permitted to employ any more Europeans.

In many ways Hermannsburg is a unique community, as in general, it has a reasonable in-put of Aboriginal involvement. In fact, the whole of the Council staff, excluding the essential services person, Glen and myself, were all Aborigines. The President's goal was to have all positions filled by Aborigines, and one of his relatives from South Australia had been earmarked to take over the management of the store when he decided it suited him.

Nepotism was certainly much in evidence at Hermannsburg with the President's relatives arriving from near and far to take up top positions in the community. In fact, all the Council members were closely related, which of course made for more dissatisfaction between the locals. One of the new arrivals had been a victim of an early government policy of part-Aboriginal children being taken away from their families and sent to a mission station. Sadly, he still does not know his true identity. Others were descendants of mixed marriages between Aboriginal women and Afghan cameliers. In the early days these Afghans roamed on their camels through areas of the outback, carrying mail and supplies which they delivered to stations and mining camps. We were told by some of their descendants, that the proliferation of the colourful reddish flowered hops growing throughout these regions can be attributed to these cameliers, who often stuffed their saddle bags with these plants and, if the bags became torn, the seeds were scattered far and wide.

Because Palm Valley is situated 15 kilometres from Hermannsburg and because of the significant local history of Hermannsburg, many tourists visit the area, quite a large percentage from overseas. A number would visit the store and, as well as stocking up, they seemed to require a great deal of tourist information — in the month of June 1990, Palm Valley had 10,000 tourists. I bought some maps which we displayed on the shop walls, and also asked the Park Rangers for relevant pamphlets. Some attractive Conservation Commission posters were also displayed on the walls.

Many of the tourists were intrigued and interested in one of the favourite Aboriginal delicacies — unskinned frozen kangaroo tails, which the locals cooked in hot coals. They also wondered at the range of artificial flowers in stock — these were used in great quantities at funerals.

One day, Glen and I were to watch in awe the migration of the Processionary Caterpillars. It was an unbelievable experience to see them leave their nest, which looked like an enormous cocoon about the size of a football, perched high in a tree. They climbed down the finest of silky threads, which they produce; these threads were strung so close together that they formed a ladder to the ground. The leaders lined up into position with other caterpillars hitching up head to tail with, it seemed, only their spiky head hairs touching the rear hairs of the preceding caterpillar and then off they set. Our lawn was covered with them; the longest procession we saw was of fourteen caterpillars. A Park Ranger told me this natural phenomenon occurs about the

first of May each year. He also advised us not to touch them as, with good reason, they are also called The Itchy Caterpillars.

One day, a tourist coach with twenty-one passengers on board travelled from Alice Springs to Palm Valley and arrived in time for lunch. The driver opened his picnic hamper to feed his hungry passengers only to find the cupboard was bare — the person responsible had forgotten to fill it with food. He hastily drove back to Hermannsburg while we hurriedly set about preparing sandwiches for their lunch.

We stayed at Hermannsburg for three months. I was absolutely exhausted and unfortunately became ill, finishing up with a short spell in the Alice Springs Hospital. After convalescing at a motel there, I decided enough was enough. Glen stayed on until a new manager and his wife were appointed along with three more Europeans — how quickly things change!

CHAPTER 35

PROBLEMS

Regrettably, over the years, many inept and unqualified people have been given positions of responsibility and authority in Aboriginal communities. Under self-determination, when and where requested by Aborigines, qualified Europeans should share their knowledge and expertise with compassion and understanding as advisers who do not attempt to dominate.

Store managers generally in the past have not been paid generously and have had no security of tenure of job or superannuation, and rarely were bonuses or incentives available. Unfortunately, some have seen their chance of supplementing their income by robbing the store and cheating Aboriginal people

Some local Aborigines also do not help with the liquidity of their store, as they persistently ask the manager for book down and loans, many of which are never repaid. Sometimes, if the store manager is not a determined person, he gives in to their wishes. The system of book down is often used to personal advantage, not only by store managers, but also by hawkers, road-house operators and station owners. On occasions in the past, some Social Security cheques were posted to Aborigines, care of the store owners, some of whom encouraged this practice and were happy to distribute and change these cheques. These people allowed book down mainly after a cheque had been spent, thus ensuring that they had a lien over future cheques. The Aboriginal customers were mostly in a permanent state of debt and poverty, having very little or no ready money to go anywhere or do anything that required the spending of an actual dollar. This practice continues to this day.

We did not believe in the book down system and tried to point out to our customers its disadvantages and that even on their first book down, when they thought they were ahead, in reality, this may well be the start for them being in a constant state of debt. We encouraged them to try to budget and also, where available, use the bank, so they would be able to get better value from their cheques each fortnight. Occasionally, as our system was not infallible, there were a few older people who were unable to make ends meet but we never saw them go hungry, as the store could afford to help out these genuine cases for need. We adopted this system in the hope that the majority of our customers would, in the future, be able to manage their own affairs.

Apparently, some people believe that all money allocated for Aboriginal purposes in the Federal Budget goes directly into the pockets of Aborigines. This, of course, is untrue as great sums are spent on administration of the many Aboriginal organisations around Australia. Many of these organisations are staffed by Europeans as well as Aborigines, for all of whom salaries are needed. On communities, the building and maintaining of schools, clinics, council offices, police buildings, housing, and all ancillary requirements are also costly, as are the essential services of power, water and sewerage, as well as Social Security payments.

On some communities, instead of Unemployment Benefits being paid, a block grant of money from the Community Development Employment Program is received, when people may register for work for five hours per day five days a week to avail themselves of this money, which works out to a little more than the Unemployment Benefits.

In the August 1990 Federal Budget, it was announced that Unemployment Benefits as we knew them were to cease on all communities and instead, the Community Development Employment Program would be put into operation. This is administered by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Commission.

It is a sad but interesting fact that some of the very intelligent Aborigines, with little more than primary school education, have been and still are thrust into positions of highly stressful responsibility, doing a marvellous job for their own people. Tragically, this stress may have been responsible for a number of premature deaths in their ranks.

On most communities there is an urgent need for a big clean up and general maintenance, and more adult educators to help people understand the importance of clearing away rubbish to lessen health risks, as well as to teach other skills such as basic house repairs, maintenance and home management, all of which would be of use in the community.

A hope for the future of some of these people is to lessen the numbers of unsuitable Europeans being employed in jobs to which Aboriginal people should be given priority. If Europeans are necessary, every effort should be made by the local Aboriginal Council thoroughly to screen people for suitability for that particular job and not to employ anyone just because the person happens to be looking for work in the community.

Local Aboriginal Councils, of course, should have the over-riding authority on the communities and are doing their best, but at times they must find it very difficult when major decisions are made in places like Canberra, Alice Springs and Darwin with little or no consultation with the local Council. In some instances, through lack of experience, Council permission has been granted to Europeans without Council members quite realising the

ramifications of these courses of action. Some Europeans do not teach Aborigines their jobs for fear of losing grip on their employment.

A few Aborigines with more education are leaving their communities and taking up employment with Land Councils, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Commission or other Aboriginal organisations. It is interesting to note that some of these people, who, whilst living on a community, were heavy drinkers, and now have worthwhile jobs, no longer touch alcohol. On some communities there are still a few jobs for which Aborigines may not as yet have attained the necessary expertise or, even if they do have the necessary skills for the job, there can at times be problems. For an Aboriginal person to become a store manager is fraught with difficulties because, apart from having to make profits to pay creditors, wages, insurance and freight, and generally having to do business with the real world outside a community, there are the added family pressures on local Aborigines which make the job almost untenable.

Generally in the past Aborigines have not engaged in confrontation with Europeans but have backed away instead, and thus on numerous occasions have left themselves wide open to exploitation and at the mercy of unscrupulous people. Over recent years, there seems to have been a breaking down of some European domination, with Aborigines to a greater degree becoming more confident in exercising their rights and taking a more positive role in the running of their own affairs.

On some communities, managers of various organisations at times think they will take the easy way out and instead of training Aboriginal staff, they opt to employ Europeans. The more Europeans that are employed the more Aboriginal people seem to lose interest and tend to leave it to them.

CONCLUSION

There seem to be no easy answers to the very serious and pressing cultural, social and economic problems currently facing Aboriginal people. I am sure that even the country's intellectual resources would be taxed to the utmost to find suitable, positive solutions.

It is true that Aboriginal culture is gradually becoming a little better understood by white Australians. However, even well-intentioned people still make many blunders by failing to understand local Aboriginal needs and by being reluctant to allow real self-determination on Aboriginal communities.

It would appear some Aboriginal people feel that the changes of direction in their lives are not to their liking, whilst others disagree. Most can never forget white people's inhumanity to their ancestors, the loss of their land and sacred objects, the fishing of their rivers, the shooting of their game, racism and discrimination, the desecration of their sacred sites, as well as the devastation caused to many of their people by the introduction of alcohol.

Aboriginal deaths in custody have been most traumatic for many families and friends. Because of the disproportionate number of charges laid against Aborigines as compared with non-Aborigines, the former are twenty times more likely to go to gaol than a white person. It often seems that penalties for Aborigines are far greater than befit the crimes. Expressed in the words of an Aboriginal song I once heard:

Our dreams have turned to sorrow now that white man treads our paths.

Let us hope some of today's problems will soon be solved and that future generations of Aboriginal people will then write and sing happier songs.

Stores & Stories

Northern Territory Aboriginal Communities

Most Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory are remote from large urban centres and have only limited access to the modern shopping available in towns and cities. Because of this, community stores are a focal point of life on Aboriginal communities, with the success or otherwise of the store often reflecting the general state of the community. In the past, community stores were run by Europeans but in recent years Aboriginal people have increasingly assumed control. In the telling of the experience of one couple employed for over two decades in stores on Aboriginal communities in the Top End and in the Centre, this change is revealed. But the life of the store is partly the life of the community and interesting, novel and rewarding experiences abound.

Jean Bagshaw came to the Northern Territory with her husband, Glen, in 1969. Glen had been appointed Business Manager of the Maningrida Co-operative Society and Jean, his assistant. They were to remain in the Territory, working in stores in Arnhem Land and the Centre, until their retirement twenty-four years later. In this book, Jean Bagshaw recalls her experiences and the changes she and her husband witnessed. She now lives in Adelaide.

