

## **HAVE FERGIE – WILL TRAVEL.** By Maxine Gardiner

The Dig Tree Trek, 14<sup>th</sup> August to 13<sup>th</sup> September 2017.

Sun, red sand, burrs, dust, wind, and flies – welcome to the Australian Outback. What a magnificent place to travel, with such a diverse variety of scenery, wildlife; and magnificent sunrise / sunsets. Complete with wide open spaces & brilliant night skies.

A contingent of 36 people left Fort Courage Caravan Park, Wentworth, the aim - to get to the Dig Tree & back on Fergie tractors, following some of the journey Burke & Wills never completed. They started from Melbourne on the 20<sup>th</sup> August 1860, with 19 men. We started on 14<sup>th</sup> August 2017 with 19 tractors & 14 support vehicles; including one 2WD tray truck, one 4WD bus (converted to motor home) & one large trailer carrying spare parts/welder etc; (& we made it back alive). Many towed camper trailers, with some having sleeping accommodation in their vehicles, 3 drivers had swags on stretchers in the outdoors. 7 tractor drivers went solo – no back-up crew; so at meal times it was “get your own”. Some chose to band together to make mealtimes easier. We had 1 woman tractor driver, (solo), & a total of 11 women altogether. The age of the group ranged from 24 to 82 years. The crew had a special “alarm clock” for the trek. This was Doc, playing a very bad version of reveille on the bugle, always at 6am. Although I noticed there were a few mornings it was up to 15 minutes earlier. The weather was very kind to us, providing minimal rain, plenty of sunshine; but an excess of cold wind. Our tractor drivers rugged up every day with beanies, scarves & gloves - just to keep warm. Each travelling day started before 6am, breakfast, followed by packing up camp, ready to move by 8am sharp.

From Wentworth we travelled north to Lethero Station, camping on the banks of the Darling River. Day 2 on to Tolarno Station, where we were invited to tour the magnificent old homestead & surrounds, and given a very animated talk by the owner. It was mainly about the demise of the Darling River; which was an awful green- brown colour. Shearing was in progress on Tolarno, with a young NZ gun shearer clocking up 310 sheep for the day. Day 3 was to Menindee, we enjoyed a cool beer and sandwiches in the Maiden Inn pub, a place dedicated to Burke and Wills. 6 km out of town to stay at the van park (aah – hot showers) overlooking the Menindee lake; which did have plenty of water. Day 4 we continued to Broken Hill, where we enjoyed our first rest day – ha ha. ( It was catch-up on the washing, sort food/water etc.) We also celebrated a 50<sup>th</sup> birthday at the Chinese restaurant. As we left BH, we lined up opposite the tourist information centre, in Kintore Headframe Park, creating a lot of interest, including the ABC radio. The young reporter interviewed Geoff among others, airing their interviews 3 days later.

Out to Mt Gipps Station where BHP was originally started back in 1885, then known as the Broken Hill Company. John & Kym gave a wonderful talk about BHP, & the station. We awoke a nice big frost & minus 6 degrees. On to Pine View via the Tarrawingee mine. Along this road we found evidence of the rail line used to transport the minerals found, to Broken Hill and beyond. At Pine View we camped near the shearer's quarter's, appreciating the hot showers & beautiful wood fired pizza's the owners cooked for our arrival. On to Smithville Station, where we were given a talk on the dog fence & maintenance of 600km of it by this station. We camped by a dry creek bed, enjoying a sing-a-long around the camp-fire as Bob played his guitar and/or banjo.

Day 9 was THE best day. We had been given special permission to travel the dog fence from Smithville Station to Cameron's Corner. It was great fun zooming up the sand dunes & rolling down the other side. We saw dozens of kangaroos, all sizes & colours. I nearly got tangled up with a couple of emus who were racing past in front of me. Our lady truck driver Joan, managed the dunes with ease. We had fluffy sand, wavy bits & snappy sections. (our lead vehicle driver's words to tell us what to expect). Lots of photos taken at Cameron's Corner with tractor line-ups, support crew line-ups & signs, mostly in Sth Australia. A few of us enjoyed an evening meal in the shop/pub/restaurant.

Two days driving along the bore track, usually reserved for the gas pipeline operators, proved very interesting. Fluffy & wavy sand again, bouncy corrugations, also our 'rest' stops were now called 're-connecting with nature' or 'nature walks'. We camped overnight in the Innaminka National Park. After tea Alan entertained us with a talk on the night sky, of which we had a magnificent view. Along the bore track our truck, 1 tractor, Maggot & Wes left us to try to find an 'easier route' to Innaminka. They didn't – travelling 171km to our 60 or so.

We arrived in Innaminka on Friday 25<sup>th</sup>, enjoying 2 days/3 nights camped along the banks of Cooper's Creek. Maggot had to do some major repair work, having broken a stub axle in the land cruiser. All found plenty to do here; washing, visiting the store or pub, with some going to the local gymkhana. All made use of the \$2 showers at the store to wash away the dust. We visited the local cemetery; a harsh, barren place. Each grave was surrounded by stones, with few headstones. 2 graves faced differently – believed to be Afghan camel drivers.

On to see Burke's Grave, a few km from town, then on to the Dig Tree which is on Nappa Merri Station. Another rest day, with a great talk by ranger Col, on explorers Burke & Wills. Most of us bought a book written by an owner of the station in the early 1900's.

Down through Orientos & Naryilco Stations, camping on both overnight in paddocks by the road, before moving on to Tibooburra. 2 nights in the caravan park, washing & visiting the local sights. Several of us drove out to Mt Woods Station, which once had a wool scouring plant. Many of the original fences & equipment used was still here, in very poor condition. We also walked across a particularly wobbly suspension bridge, this led from the shearing shed to the quarters over a dry creek bed. Everyone enjoyed a great night out as a club, celebrating the 80<sup>th</sup> birthday of one of our SA members. Don was awoken by the bugle, again, playing a rather bad rendition of Happy Birthday, as everyone sang to him. On our last morning, Geoff and I caught up with a group of Benalla folk, including Dr Paul Kelly, who had been staying at the same caravan park.

At Milparinka, we camped on the creek where it was a little more sheltered from the howling wind. Geoff & I visited Poole's grave (he was one of Charles Sturt's men). The inscription on the *grevillea robusta* tree was still visible, being 172 plus, years old. At 3pm we all enjoyed an early Father's Day 'happy hour' in the shade of the gums along the creek. One woman even soaked her feet in "spring" water. (one of the guys found an old car spring, put it in a bucket of water – thus spring water (outback humour)). On to Pimpara Lake Station, the lake was dry; but we had interesting scenery with a lovely sunset. John & Ruth Sandow made us very welcome, giving a fun talk, & providing hot showers/clean toilets. The crew moved on to Fowler's Gap Research station. Here they gave a talk on the birds of study by the overseas students. Return to Broken Hill for 3 nights where we enjoyed our motel room, while the others stayed at the van park. A trip to Silverton with a line-up of tractors in front of the pub. Return to Menindee. The owners provided us with a roast lamb dinner, extremely delicious & much appreciated. To Pooncarie to camp on the Darling. It was very relaxing here, although the colour of the water was still a green-brown. Out to Lake Mungo National Park, where the group did a tour of The Walls of China on a 32 degree day at 2pm. Great way to spend our last rest day. Back to Lethero Station. It was here on the banks of the Darling, where we had our presentation evening. Our trek organiser Bob was given a photo of the group lined up at the Dig Tree, beautifully framed. Our tractor & support crew leaders & tail-end Charlie's were all given small gifts. And The Blue Max (tractor tail end Charlie) handed out special prizes for a few others, mostly made from things he had found along the road. It was all quite amusing. Our last day, the 13<sup>th</sup> September, saw us return to Wentworth; where once again the Angling Club cooked us a welcome evening meal.

The station owners were all very welcoming, giving talks on their properties, some providing hot showers, toilet facilities & firewood. Breakdowns included the stub axle, 1 tractor with a rocker arm issue (fixed during smoko break), 1 broken tractor seat, 1 tractor broke a crankshaft (near Pooncarie – trailered back from here), 1 had fuel/oil issues that were eventually sorted, 2 camper trailers had cracked or broken draw-bars, & 1 got tow started a couple of cold mornings (need to buy a bigger battery Geoff). All breakdowns were capably fixed by the crew.

Fuel prices ranged from \$1.30 to \$2.00 per litre. Diesel tractors used from 9 to 22 litres of fuel per 100km. Petrol tractors used approximately 30 litres fuel per 100km. This trek was about 2130km in total. Those with no support vehicle travelled further as the tractor was their only transport. Geoff's tractor has now travelled over 9000km in total for the last 3 treks (that's not counting its travel by trailer to & from trek starting points). Friendships were renewed with folk met on the WA/NT trek two years previous, or from Cape York in 2013, plus new friendships were created. All our address books came home fuller. We arrived back with 4 tractors less (due to either mechanical or personal reasons) & 4 less people than we started, however, we gained the daughter of our vehicle leader, north of Broken Hill. Rachel drove a little hatchback car where the rest had 4WD's.

Our last night at Wentworth was quite emotional. For some it was like saying farewell to family, others were relieved it was over, but we all agreed it had been an interesting trip. Why do we do it?? Because we can!!! Planning has already begun for 2019's trip by our SA members.

Members were from Hervey and Bremer Bay in WA

Mt Gambier, Penola & Yankalilla in SA

Mackay, Wallaville, Tannum Sands & Mountain Camp in QLD

Longford in Tasmania

The remainder came from Maiden Gully, Molyullah, Camperdown, Johnsonville, Beaconsfield, Rutherglen, Chiltern Valley, Hamilton, Woolamai, Maryknoll, Meeniyan, & Merbein in Victoria