

## Roper Bar and Back

Before we left the surveyors' camp we told them we'd be back in a day or two and would stop. They suggested that we have a word with two of their crew who were fishing at the Roper Bar and urge them to return with their catch.

That night late we made the Bar and startled the dog of the fishing surveyors near a yellow Toyota truck. We slipped around getting a few tape recordings and collecting some crickets, and then settled down under a big gum tree to sleep out the last few hours before dawn. The surveyors were up early fishing, so we didn't get too much sleep. But we didn't crawl out of our sleeping bags until the sun hit us and things began to be uncomfortably hot. Then I couldn't stay longer because I was hearing two different crickets singing in the mottled shade of the leaf litter scattered beneath the gum tree, where I had expected to hear only one.

We taped and collected the leaf-inhabiting crickets, bantered a bit with the anglers, and then drove back along the dusty road. I remembered that the night before a half-grown dingo pup had suddenly raced along in our headlights, and in a flood of exuberance I had braked quickly and chased him off into the darkness on foot. Of course, he outdistanced me so swiftly that I felt completely foolish.

About noon we came upon the surveyors' camp again and stopped to yarn and report on their crew members at the Bar. They were primed again with questions about studying crickets. But we enjoyed every minute of it. If I cannot explain my work to anyone who asks, I figure it's my fault, not his. The people we met across all of Australia were remarkably understanding of Dan's and my work.

## Two Blokes Again

By dark on the night we returned from the Roper Bar, we were near the junction of the Stuart and Barkley Highways north of Tennant's Creek, and decided to stop at the service station and restaurant for a cup of coffee before going earnestly to work for the evening. About eight in the evening we finally emerged, drove a few hundred yards east of the place, and stopped to work a bit.

While I was tape-recording about 25 yards off in the desert, Dan returned to the Land Rover to write in the field book. I heard a voice say to Dan, "Hullo! Remember us!?" Curious, I walked back toward the



Road to Roper Bar

vehicle, and out of the darkness came two rows of grinning teeth. Our transient friends had arrived at the junction only a little before us, and had just prepared their beds in the desert along the highway, to wait for a ride in the morning. We hastened to explain that we were planning to turn off to the north toward Borrooloola. I also described our stop-and-go method of working at night to discourage them from wanting to tag along with us again – a possibility that would cause us great difficulties in working around and with the various items of gear we had to use. To our relief, they didn't seem to be interested anyway. Apparently it was bedtime. Before we drove off, however, they asked for another drink from our water bags, which we were happy to give. As usual, Dan grabbed a cup for them, as he had done when we offered them drinks before loading them in the vehicle the day before. He had done it so quickly that time that both men had been a little startled. He had a definite aversion to more than a single person drinking from a water bag, as I discovered when we originally bought a single water bag. I shared his feeling, but probably not as intensely. This time, as we drove away after I had let the two men drink from my bag again, I peered around at him slyly and said, "Sure hope those guys didn't have TB or leprosy!" "Yeah!" he answered quickly with a grin, "For all you know, they may have been just sloshing that water around in their mouths and spitting it back into your bag!"

Some time during the early part of Dan's and my travels across Australia's deserts, I had purchased a canvas water bag and hung it on the front of the bumper of the Land Rover. Most people who've traveled a desert or worked in fields of oats, wheat, or hay, are likely to know that evaporation through a canvas bag keeps the water in the bag slightly cool – whether by a breeze or by the bag being placed on the outside of a moving vehicle. I was raised on a U.S. farm in the middle of the state of Illinois, during times when everyone working in a field drank out of the same water jug. Of course the field crew then was pretty much a group of well-known neighbors and relatives.

On our very first stop after getting the desert bag for the Land Rover in Australia, I lifted it, and without a thought took a long drink, just as Dan was coming around the Land Rover. Out of the corner of my eye I was startled to see his face with a quick look of dismay when he saw my mouth on that bag. Then I noticed he was carrying his tin cup, used almost entirely for tea. I hadn't thought of that reasonable strategy. We didn't carry containers for drinking separately to the farm fields in Illinois. But I supposed that the die had been cast when I drank straight from the bag, and I had to hope that Dan would quickly get over his queasiness. So I said nothing. I felt sure he had used desert water bags many times where he grew up in South Africa's equivalent of the Outback of Australia. Nevertheless, he gave no indication that he had gotten over the idea of more than one person clapping his lips on the spout of a water bag. Indeed, in the next town, to both his relief and mine, Dan obtained his own water bag and triumphantly hung it on his (left) end of the front bumper.

Dan and I used separate water bags for almost the entire remainder of the trip. Then, during the last weeks of the year, he repeatedly indicated that the water from his bag was beginning to acquire a peculiar and revolting flavor. At first I didn't much notice his comments, only chuckling now and then at the explosions of distaste and noisy spitting when he had taken another sip. After all, we had experienced significant changes in the taste of water acquired at different locations.

Then one day in a small town in northwestern Australia we had purchased pint containers of ice cream and were sprawled against a shop in front of the Land Rover, eating and watching the local traffic. While we were in that comfortable position I happened to notice an old, mangy, stiff, and very likely ailing dog hobbling down the street. As I watched, he started to pass in front of the Land Rover, then deviated sharply toward Dan's bag. At once I knew what was wrong with Dan's water, and I blurted out to call his attention to the dog's behavior just as it sniffed toward the bumper and cocked its ancient hind leg. Quite accurately and suddenly, it squirted an ample and murky slug of liquid against the side of the water bag. The stuff was so viscous that it caused an almost sculptured greenish-yellow surface to ooze slowly down the side of the bag as if it were an ancient amoeba, dying gradually in the Australian sunshine.

The horror in Dan's face caused such a reaction in me that for a while I was prevented from replying to his unhappy belief that I might have seen the dog in time to stop him from accomplishing his repulsive act. When finally I could speak again, I suggested that this particular dog had only revealed what must have been going on for months, or the bag wouldn't have attracted the poor old wretch of a dog in that fashion.

Dan did not reply to this hypothesis, and indeed, from that moment on, he gave the distinct impression that he did not wish to discuss the matter further.

Although Dan provided the original inspiration for this story, all of the events that supposedly took place cannot be attributed to him. Nor do they reflect on him. I wanted too badly to make this next rhyme into a good story to worry about keeping it absolutely true to the events that precipitated it. I regarded my job as organizing the sequence of events, creating the necessary rhymes and suggestions of melodies, generating a decent cadence, and telling a good story. This meant that, unlike most of the other seven songs in this book, I took the liberty to adjust and exaggerate certain things, especially the physical and physiological responses of the mythical new chum that Dan represented for the unfortunate situation that unfolded. In the song, I took the liberty of giving myself the fake part of a well-seasoned Aussie, and painted my partner as a new chum. So long as the reader is fully aware that I couldn't possibly make this deliberately humorous and somewhat exaggerated story absolutely accurate, especially with respect to the people involved, I feel justified in creating it. I like the verse, and I would guess that many different versions of what is portrayed in the story have taken place in many different parts of the world, including the Outback of Australia.

There's some Australian lingo in the verse that follows here that might be considered quaint by part of the audience, and may not even be understood by Americans. But it's good outback "Strine," as I think any Australian would acknowledge. A new chum, of course, is a tenderfoot (in the U.S.), and the term applies to both Dan and me, even though the verse says something different. Being bogged is being stuck in the mud, sand, or bull dust. As already noted, bull dust is dry clay churned into a powder on outback tracks by countless grinding wheels, creating what looks and behaves like warm yellow or reddish snow, sometimes a foot or more deep. Petrol, of course, is gasoline in the U.S. Yarning is talking casually or telling stories. Calling for Ralph is barfing, and so is a technicolor yodel.

I dearly wish I could occasionally sing this song to a modification of the tune to *Happy Jack*, made prominent by Slim Dusty, as that gentleman has done with so many wonderful Australian songs.

### The New Chum and the Desert Water Bag

If you've time I'll tell what happened in the year of sixty-eight  
When I crossed Australia's deserts with me sparkling new chum mate  
He was game and he was able, but one thing that made him gag  
Was the thought of trading swallows from a desert water bag.

He could stand in mud up to his knees and heave us out when bogged  
He could drive all night and wrestle with a petrol line that clogged  
But his countenance would wither, you could see his shoulders sag  
If he saw me put my mouth up to our desert water bag.

I have heard of tender stomachs but this new chum beat them all  
You'd have thought I had the old TB and the cholera and all  
Before he'd touch a drop he'd rather suck an old dry rag  
If he'd seen me place my lips upon our desert water bag.

Two days out we came to Quilpie, and I was wondering how he'd last  
When I stopped that old Land Rover he was out and moving fast  
He was smiling when we left there, and he could well afford to brag  
By the left front wheel there swung my new chum's very own desert bag.

When he filled his bag that morning he said the water tasted fine  
He said it curled around his tongue just like a finely aging wine  
He said it sparkled in his cup as if directly from the spring  
With a fragrance to remind that life is such a wondrous thing.

No more he'd have to suffer from the desert's burning heat  
Triumphantly he'd fill his cup with water pure and sweet  
We traveled on in harmony across the continent  
And you've never seen two traveling mates that were any more content.

South of Darwin once we came across two blokes along the road  
With a Holden that had died and left them stranded where they stood  
They had waited without water several hours along the drag  
And I quickly handed to them my old desert water bag.

While they swallowed from it gratefully, me mate looked on aghast  
When we dropped them off at Katherine he started on me fast  
"I can't believe you did that!" He was holding back a gag.  
"You could never know if one or both spit back into your bag!"

It was somewhere south of Derby I began to sense a change  
Me mate would take a mouthful then he'd stare out across the range  
Sometimes his lips would pucker and he'd give a little cough  
Then he'd stare at his cup in wonderment and carefully wipe it off.

I could see that he was puzzled but I wisely kept quite still  
Until one day I can't forget and I guess I never will  
We were standing by the Rover yarning in the morning sun  
When down the track there came this ancient canine on a run.

He was old and he was mangy, and I'd reckon he'd been ill  
But what he did in passing gave me new chum mate a chill.  
As he wandered by the Rover you could see his old nose twitch  
And he turned toward the left front wheel as he gave his leg a hitch.

In a moment it was over, the result was sad to see  
Why me new chum's water tasted bad he knew most suddenly  
Then and there he lost his breakfast, you could hear him calling "Ralph!"  
And his technicolor yodel carried two miles and a half.

I wish I could describe for you precisely what was seen  
Inelegantly oozing down, all yellowish and green  
Like an alien amoeba creeping down a dampened rag  
Till it thickened there and dried to form an emblem on the bag.

Me mate cried, "You could-a stopped him! You seen the beast in time!"  
But I shook my head and sadly said, "It's not my fault this time  
Every dog across Australia that could give his tail a wag  
If he passed by this Land Rover pissed upon your water bag!"

When that episode was finished, me mate was never quite the same  
 Late at night when he'd be sleeping I would hear him call my name  
 He'd moan and groan and toss and twist, and sometimes wake and gag  
 And I'd know that he'd been dreaming of that doggie desert bag.

Did you fill your bag at Normanton, did the water there taste fine?  
 Or did it curl itself around your tongue like a faintly spoiling wine?  
 Did it lie there in your cup and take a slightly amber hue?  
 Did its fragrance climb your nose each time you took a sip or two?

So now you know what happened in the year of sixty-eight  
 When I crossed Australia's desert with me sparkling new chum mate  
 I suppose we'll never understand, from Townsville round to Perth.  
 Why those Aussie canines gave my own bag a wide and friendly berth.

It's a puzzle in the story, struth, but I'll bloody guarantee  
 That me mate he did no drinking from my bag or after me.  
 He was game and he was able, but now what makes him gag  
 Is the thought of all the drinks he drank from that doggie desert bag.

*And now you know what happened in the year of sixty-eight  
 When we crossed Australia's deserts while we both were new chum mates.  
 But we found 500 crickets, three hundred seventy-two were new  
 And we still found times to write some rhymes and tell a tale or two.*

### The New Chum and the Desert Water Bag

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