

As a whole, the story-song I am about to present seems fictional, but it is almost entirely a composite of people and events encountered by Dan and me during our 12 months in Australia in 1968 and 1969. We met a number of “old blokes” in different parts of the outback, and we heard and read a good deal about what various “old blokes” have done there. As the story goes, we also did indeed ring the country and cross it, and we “ranged her end from end.” We watched a cattle herd being mustered, close-up, in the Kimberleys. We visited Kalgoorlie and Mount Isa, and we passed through the rabbit and dingo fences in more than one place. “Near Darwin,” “on the run south from the sea,” we picked up those two hitchhikers on their way to “the canefields south of Tully.” At Karumba, Queensland, we spent time around a campfire talking with the “old bloke” who was making his living fishing there, and who had previously “chased a mob of Merinos on a station back of Bourke.” He, as with several others we met, had one of those famous Australian one-man dogs. We talked to men who graded the Outback roads, and to one of their wives, the hitch-hiker my family picked up, along with her small daughter. Somewhere north of Alice Springs we helped that New Australian truckie, mentioned earlier, file down an ill-fitting hub to get the spare on his rig. In different outback pubs, we talked to a variety of people who had traveled the roads of Australia extensively, in one fashion or another. We slept near the traces of “black man’s fires” in remote places where it was easy to imagine (or wish) that no other kind of human had ever built a campfire.

When I initially sang this next song to my family, while still in Australia, our 15-year old daughter, Susan, said it seemed authentic, except when I mentioned buffaloes, which she knew were strictly North American. But the North American “buffalo” is really a bison not a buffalo. And in the Northern Territory scarcely anyone bothers to put the “water” in front of “buffalo.” Water buffaloes were introduced into Australia nearly 200 years ago, and live wild now over most of the Territory.

New chums, or New Australians, are newly arrived immigrants, seemingly most often Italians during the time we were there. The MRB is the Main Roads Bureau. A muster is a round-up, and there were many old-timers who became weird loners while minding the hundreds of miles of rabbit and dingo fence in various parts of outback Australia.

Originally I had a line in my song that said, “I helped to build the causeways for the Sydney Harbour Bridge,” but I had assumed the word “causeways” on my own and I worried about it. While visiting Sydney in 1993, I asked someone what Australians call the structures leading up to the bridge and I got the answer “pilons.” My dictionary spells it “pylons,” but I assume that this is a trivial language difference between American and Australian spelling.

The Stuart Highway runs from Darwin on the north coast to Port Augusta on the south coast, straight through the endless arid middle of the continent. As already noted, the part from Alice Springs to Darwin was black-topped by Americans during World War II, when there was fear that Darwin would be invaded by the Japanese. All the rest was still gravel and clay when we were there in 1968.

I think of this verse as an Australian version of *I've Been Everywhere*, the American song made famous by the Canadian country singer, Hank Snow. I sing it -- but only to myself! -- and to a tune modified from the song, *Me and My Burro*, from the 1937 WLS Chicago Songbook about an old miner traveling across the deserts of southwestern United States.

I picked him up near Darwin, on the run south from the sea
Along the Stuart Highway, he thumbed a ride with me
A good old bloke who'd traveled some, and that was plain to see
I asked him where he'd been, and this is what he said to me.

“Where I've not been in this old land, not many blokes have, friend
I've ringed her and I've crossed her, and I've ranged her end from end
Her mountains and her deserts, her forests and her seas
Her rivers and her billabongs, they're all sweet home to me.

"I've been in every country pub, from the Alice all around
I've sampled city night life in every coastal town
I've traveled back-block tracks the MRB could never find
And slept by black man's fires in places that have known no other kind.

"I've mustered in the Kimberleys, and I've mined at Lightning Ridge
I helped to build the pilons for the Sydney Harbour Bridge
From spotted gum in Queensland to karri south of Perth
I've helped bring in the finest timber known on this old earth.

"In the canefields south of Tully I have done my season's work
And I've chased a mob of Merinos on a station back of Bourke
I've made my living fishing where Queensland meets the sea
And I've spent some times in northern climes when everything was free.

"I've dug gold at Kalgoorlie, and I've mined Mount Isa's lead
I've graded every highway that lies north of Adelaide
I used to mind a rabbit fence, across the Great Southwest
But now I'm leavin' my last job, I'm headed for a rest."

At the junction north of Tennant Creek I struck toward Camooweal
For a while we sat and listened to the humming of the wheels
The old bloke reached into his shirt and rolled himself a smoke
And I thought, "The road seems shorter when I ride with this old bloke."

I could see his great old nose poking through the darkness there
His shapeless old felt hat that looked like forty years of wear
His tough old skin was like the hide of buffaloes I'd seen
And some time after midnight he began to yarn again.

"My folks were New Australians, but I'm not, you can bet
I know this country like my hand, and I'm not finished yet
There's a place or two I'm going to go before my days are done
A few old mates I'll yarn with before the race is run."

He stared out through the window then, and I had to strain my ear
"I lost me best old mate," he said, "Along this stretch right here
For fourteen years he shared my fire, and all my aches and laughs
A one-man dog, the only kind a one-dog man should have."

His voice began to falter, and he gave a little cough
"This is where I'll leave you, mate, if you'll just let me off."
I braked my rig and geared her down, at the Territory fence
He walked off through the darkness, and I've not seen him since.

A truckie's life is lonesome, on the long cross-country run
Pounding through the darkness, waiting for the morning sun
And when I'm on that lonely stretch, I keep hoping deep inside
I'll see that old bloke standing there, his thumb out for a ride.

The Old Bloke: 1968

I picked him up near Dar - win on the run south from the sea. A - long
the Stu - art High - way he thumbed a ride with me. A good
old bloke who'd tra - veled some and that was plain to see I asked
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been in this old land not ma - ny blokes have, friend. I've ringed her
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tains and her des - erts her for - ests and her seas, her ri - vers
and her bil - a - bongs their all sweet home to me.

The 46,000 miles Dan and I traveled in the Australian Outback are puny, especially by modern standards; but during our 12 months we never met anyone who claimed to have been all the places we had been, and we met many who marveled at the extent of our journeys. One of them was the University of Adelaide ecologist, Professor Tom Browning. His graduate students, who didn't know we had spent the previous night in long conversations at Browning's house, suggested the next morning that we should talk to him because he had been more places in Australia than anyone.

But Browning came up just as that remark was being made, and he quickly corrected the student, saying that we had been many more places in Australia than himself and anyone else he knew. So perhaps Dan and I can be forgiven for imagining that we might qualify as having a pale and temporary understanding of the blended image of "The Old Bloke." If not, perhaps we could at least think of ourselves as two people who, in a way, recognized that composite Old Bloke as a metaphorical friend.