

BROKEN HILL TO INNAMINCKA

A journey.

The journey from Broken Hill to Innamincka passes through some of western New South Wales and north eastern South Australia's most remote but fascinating country. There are no giant monoliths to dominate a single landscape, but one that varies constantly, with an air of surprise hidden around almost every bend in the road. Wide open vistas broken by gum lined creeks. Salty lakes set amongst sand hills. Dunes and swales running at odds with the prevailing winds.

With little exception this is pastoral country (other than for mining interests), the area divided by fences and boundaries into the sheep and cattle stations of the West Darling, and north eastern South Australia. This is a semi-arid landscape, desert even, with low average rainfall, high average summer temperatures, and few people. Those who live on the properties are carrying on a tradition begun on the heels of explorers like Charles Sturt,

It has its share of heartbreak, mostly the result of climatic excesses; too little rain, or too much. Few will deny that it is good country, for when given the right season it grows just about anything.

Milparinka is located almost in the middle of the journey from Broken Hill to Innamincka, and it is here, at the heart, that this story begins. In 1845 Charles Sturt led an expedition to try reach the centre of the continent, where, he was convinced, he would find an inland sea. Skirting around the Flinders Ranges to avoid the impenetrable horse-shoe shaped "Lake Torrens"¹ Sturt traveled along the Murray River, then the Darling, until he reached Menindie. From there the party traveled to the north west, camping for a while near the now location of Broken Hill, and later making a foray further west to "Lake Torrens".

Continuing northward through ever increasing dry country Sturt reached a water hole on a creek that eventually became known as Depot Glen. By now drought had gripped the country, and the expedition was forced to remain in camp for more than six months. This spot, just fourteen kilometres from Milparinka, is one of the Australia's most important historical sites. The decision to wait for rain, rather than risk the lives of the expedition members, must surely mark Sturt as a leader of great wisdom and compassion.

Sturt did loose one member of the expedition, James Poole. His burial place is located near Depot Glen. Together with the cairn of stones built on top of nearby Mt Poole these three sites are open to the travelers of today.

In ensuing years Depot Glen was visited by other explorers, most notably Ernest Giles, and became the site of a gold rush that would grip the region some twenty five years later, in the late 1870s. Before then, however, pastoralists and squatters had begun gradually creeping their flocks of sheep northwards, taking advantage of seasonal waterholes, and the grasses and edible perennial shrubs that grow throughout the area. One of the first was Sturt's Meadows, established by Abraham and Matilda Wallace.

¹ Earlier explorers of the Flinders Ranges believed that lake Torrens, Lake Eyre and Lake Frome were in fact one conjoined lake that sounded the northern reaches of the range from west to east.

In 1880 Milparinka, having been swamped by the thousands of would be miners who flocked along the then main route from the Darling River Port of Wilcannia to the gold fields of Mt Browne, (just to the south of Mt Poole and Depot Glen), was finally proclaimed a township. Its meteoric rise to importance was matched only by its demise. Substantial stone buildings rose from the dry desert floor as the first European community in the far west of New South

Wales grew, only to be abandoned less than forty years later with the realisation that the goldfields would never deliver up the hoped-for riches.

Within the region, then known as the Albert Goldfields, grew three other townships: Mt Browne, Albert and The Granites. Today, only Milparinka and The Granites, now called Tibooburra, its Aboriginal name, remain.

Charles Sturt's influence on the history and settlement of inland Australia did extend well beyond Milparinka. When rains eventually freed the expedition from Depot Glen it moved north westward toward the corner of New South Wales, South Australian and Queensland, (later to be known as Cameron Corner.)² A camp was established on Frome Creek (Fort Grey) and a party proceeded onwards towards central Australia. Sturt reached Coopers Creek, now famous because of the 1861 Burke and Wills expedition, and beyond into Sturt's Stony Desert. The inland sea that Sturt was so convinced lay in the middle of the continent was never found. Perhaps he was a few millennia too late.

Today's travelers from the Broken Hill region to Innamincka can follow an approximate southern route of Sturt's expedition if they follow the unsealed road to the west, out past Silverton, then through station country as the road continues northwards roughly parallel with the state border. Further north this road veers away from the wild dog fence, and turns westward towards Milparinka. This section is known as the Hawker Gate Road.

Alternatively, a closer approximation of the route has been defined as "Sturt's Steps" and leaves the border fence north of Pine View Station, takes a turn east, then north again to Milparinka.

For those not wanting to travel on to Innamincka, a loop road connects the Hawker Gate Road with the Cameron Corner to Tibooburra Road.

In the early 1880s mining interest was also being developed in the Silverton area. By the mid 1880s the township had been established, with a smattering of other small villages; places with names like Thackaringa, Purnamoota, and Talgingen. Eventually they too would all die, leaving the region with the largest silver lead and zinc mine in the world: the city of Broken Hill. Before that though, a rail link between the smelter town of Port Pirie and Silverton was constructed, with linkages to the north and the tin and talc mines of Tarrawingee. Another township, Euriowie, was also tucked in amongst the hills and creeks of the Barrier Ranges.

Goods being transported north to the Mt Browne goldfields could now follow a direct route from South Australia. Roadside hotels and shanties sprang up, providing refreshments, shelter for travelers, and fresh horses for coaches. Bores and permanent water holes were sunk to support stock traveling on foot to market, and gradually the basis of the Silver City Highway was formed, surpassing the Wilcannia to Mt Browne Road as the preferred route to the goldfields.

² In 1880 John Cameron completed the survey of the country west of the Warrego River, marking the junction of the three states.

Today people traveling from Broken Hill toward Milparinka and Tibooburra along the Silver City Highway will be mostly unaware of the former towns and staging posts. There is little to identify the sites, other than the ruins of old buildings, the odd place name, and a historic grave or two. Set amongst the sand hills near two ancient lakes is the site of the former Cobham Hotel, and the lone grave of one of the servants, and lady named Eliza Kennedy. Not identifiable are the sites of many others: the child who fell beneath the wagon wheels near Packsaddle and is buried where she fell, or that of an odd lonely traveler who perished on the road to Mt Browne.

Long gone are the huge pastoral properties that were once taken up by squatters and their shepherded flocks. Over a period of 150 years or so, and the odd Royal Commission, land division in the west is today confined to comparatively small holdings, the lease size based on an average rainfall and the capacity of the property to (originally) support one family.

Some have retained the early names of their leases, places like Mt Gipps, Corona, Sturt's Meadows, Packsaddle or Cobham. The properties remain Crown Lands, with leases issued specifically for grazing. Stock no longer walk to market along the length of the traveling stock routes, but are transported by road train, a thousand sheep at a time.

If historic Milparinka remains an enigma in the semi-desert, Tibooburra is something of an iconic outback township. It does not have the quite the same heritage buildings that form the character of Milparinka,³ but it has a few surprises of its own, and a population to match. As the administrative centre of the Corner Country, Tibooburra still has a hospital, a school and a police station. Most importantly it has the regional headquarters for the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

Surrounding Tibooburra to the north, east and west is the giant Sturt National Park. An amalgamation of several pastoral properties, Sturt National Park embraces many different arid landforms, and several historic sites: Fort Grey, Sturt's western New South Wales outpost, and Mt Wood homestead area, with its pastoral heritage display and shearing shed.

Regional sheep and cattle station properties, Theldarpa, Bollard's Lagoon and Epsilon,⁴ are also ideal places to get a really close look at the landscapes and the people that have sustained the pastoral industry for the past 150 years. Each provide accommodation in the area, and tours of the respective properties can be arranged.

The road west to Innamincka travels almost the length of Sturt National Park, and past Fort Grey, before reaching the longest single structure in the world, the wild dog fence, and Cameron Corner.

Built in the late 1890s to keep out plague-like destructive rabbits the high netting fence was later adopted as the official barrier to keep the native dingo out of sheep grazing areas. Maintained along New South Wales by landholder contributions and state taxes, the fence is constantly being repaired. Gates allow access to South Australia, and north of Tibooburra, to Queensland, but offer a specific warning to "shut the gate". A roadhouse, built in the 1990s, provides respite for the long distance traveler, before the journey continues westward, across the spinifex covered sand hills of the Strzelecki Desert.

³ Milparinka's community has overseen the restoration of the former Courthouse, police barracks and cells, and cemetery and has established a walking trail around its most significant heritage sites.

⁴ These are working sheep and cattle properties with accommodation facilities for visitors.

Sturt's journey to inland Australia made his party the first to venture into this region, his expedition reaching Cooper Creek in October 1845. What a relief this waterway would have been to the man who had just crossed countless big red sand hills, and seemingly endless shimmering gibber plains.

Today's visitors need not have such a torturous journey. The road leading from Cameron Corner certainly crosses over those infamous sand hills, but it leads most satisfactorily to the junction with the Strzelecki Track. To the north rises the smoke of gas burn off at Moomba gas fields, while giant beam pumps constantly draw oil from the bowels of the earth.

Further along, and a lookout provides information about the modern day Santos operation at Moomba. More desert, and then suddenly another reminder that we are living in the 21st Century, a giant geo-thermal drilling rig: an experiment in creating electricity from the heat of subterranean granite. Cooper Creek, and Innamincka are not far away now.

By the time the Burke and Wills expedition reached the creek in 1861 pastoralists were already grazing their stock to the south east and west. By 1872 Innamincka Station had been established with 8000 head of cattle. By the late 1870s a store had been built on the banks of the creek, and the regular transportation of produce was being carried out by the same Afghan cameleers who later attended to the needs of the miners at Mt Browne, or bore the wool from station properties in western New South Wales to the rail head at Lyndhurst, further south on the Strzelecki track

Today Innamincka is another iconic outback Australian outpost. A place where just a few live alongside the Cooper, mostly there to provide a service to the many who travel to this part of the inland, and where the Australian Inland Mission's former hospital has been beautifully restored. The sites of Burke and Wills' deaths are marked, one west, one east of the township, whilst the "Dig Tree", now old and gnarled, is some further distance east, on Nappa Merrie Station. The site is maintained by station people, and camping is permitted.

The Burke and Wills story, we know, ended tragically. Even so, today, there is a sense of what could have been as the sites of their demise, and that of the fort at the "Dig Tree" are visited.. The Cooper Creek is probably the largest water-way that a traveler will encounter on a journey from Broken Hill. Its permanence makes it very significant, whilst its waters, in flood, result in some of the best cattle fattening country one can hope to find.

Burke and Wills, together with Sturt, Eyre, Stuart and others, irrespective of how we today perceive their expeditions, paved the way for the settlement of inland Australia, and the icons that forged the character of desert living: the Afghan cameleers, the drovers and shearers, the cattle and sheep men and women, and the miners. In many ways they were the epitome of the Australian character; work hard, look out for your mate.

They also provide inspiration for writers and travelers, people who want to leave behind for a time the stresses of modern living along the coastal fringe, and find themselves wandering in the desert, uncluttered, with the sounds and sights of the bush by day, and a canopy of brilliant stars at night. For a time, at least, this is the life.

Ruth Sandow

BROKEN HILL TO INNAMINCKA

