

CULTURAL VALUES ASSOCIATED WITH ALICE SPRINGS WATER

By Dick Kimber



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**Frontispiece**

Arrernte Country

Slumped and stained glass window, Araluen Arts Centre

Designed by Wenten Rubuntja

Made by Cedar Prest with assistance from Alison Inkamala, Julie Ebatajinga, Blanche Ebatarinja and Sally Rubuntja

1988

380.0 X 440.0 cm

Araluen Art Collection

Commissioned by the Araluen Arts Centre and the Australian Bicentennial Authority, 1988.

Photographs which are not otherwise captioned were taken by Anne Pye.

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This document contains names and photographs of people who have passed away. It is conventional that after several years the names of the deceased can be used again so that others understand who is being referred to. Where possible this use has been discussed with the families concerned and permission given.

## **Acknowledgement**

The Arrernte People of the Area under Consideration are Acknowledged for Their Traditional Custodianship of the Land and Their Assistance to me in my Understandings 1970-2011.

## Foreword

I know the water stories for this Arrernte country in Alice Springs and all about. My name is Mervyn Rubuntja, and I was born in the creek at the Old Telegraph Station. My date of birth was 11-2-1958. My mother was Cynthia Kupitja; she was a Luritja woman.



*Mervyn Rubuntja*  
Photo from [www.honeyant.com.au](http://www.honeyant.com.au)

My father, old Wenten Rubuntja, worked hard to put all of the Dreamings on the big stained glass window at Araluen. It is good that his old friend Dick Kimber used this picture for the story about water. My father played football for Amoonguna and I played football for Amoonguna here in Alice Springs. And old Dick played football for Melanka. He is the old Melanka man; I remember their colours were stripes of green and white and black. And after that Melanka changed to Wests.

I have looked at all of the maps and photos in this little book about water, and they are good ones. They are easy ones. They are not dangerous.

Old Dick read me the stories. I knew all of my father's stories. Old Wenten told the stories to the land council. They are good stories, they are true stories. It is good for old Dick to use them. My father wanted white people to understand how important the water is for everyone. All the country. All the animals, all the plants, all the people. That is why he did that big stained glass window. He wanted everyone to know. All those Dreamings, they are important. You can't cut them off.

I live at Larapinta town camp. When old Dick was here yesterday (14-8-2011) we sat outside my house in the nice sunshine. I pointed to the Two Woman Dreaming little hills, and to the Dingo dreaming. Old Dick got up so that he could see. He pointed to the saddle in the range and the line of trees. That is where my father had told him the story of the *kweketje* boys. It is a love story.

Old Dick read out to me all those other stories. I asked him why they wanted to put up that statue of that old white fellow explorer, Stuart. He did not come through Heavitree Gap. Old Dick told me I was right. He was the first white man, and he came up from South Australia, riding straight for Alice Springs, but he turned away. He came up through old Toby Breaden's country and old George Breaden's. Dick knew those two old men. He met them when he was in his old motor car with Walter Smith. It was an old Holden, two colours blue. All those old people remembered Walter Smith. He was the old camel-man. Early days he brought the loading from Oodnadatta. Before motor cars, before that train, before aeroplanes. All the old people remembered him. He always gave the little kids boiled lollies. Eric Breaden is the man for that country now. His old father passed away. Eric used to play football for Wests.

Old Dick told me that first old white man Stuart turned away; he followed that Hugh River. He was looking for good waterholes. It might be a soakage, might be a rockhole, might be a spring. That is why he did not come to Alice Springs. Old Dick said after he got through the ranges through that other gap (Stuart's Pass) he came to that mountain Rubuntja. Mount Hay white fellows call him. That is my name.

Rubuntja. I have been there. And then old Stuart he came back on a line with Alice Springs on the north side. Other old white men followed Stuart, and they found Alice Springs. It was Arrernte country first. I was born there, where the Euro Dreaming is. But Stuart was the first white man, that is why they want a statue. All of the other early days white men, all of those old telegraph station men, they all followed him.

Old Dick read all of the stories. I did not know that one Old Walter Smith told him about Attack Gap. I did not know that one about all that shooting. All those old Arrernte people, they were worrying for their water. And all of those old white men, they wanted to use that water too. They had a big fight about the water. But at Emily Gap they all used the water. People all used it. Sidi Ross, Peter Ross, Claude Ross, and all of the olden time Arrernte people, and all of the olden time white-fellows, they used the water right through to Alice Springs. Undoolya, Jessie Gap, Emily Gap, Heavitree Gap, Alice Springs, Bond Springs. Everyone used the water.

My father told me about that Gillen Time. My old grandfather, Bob Rubuntja, he helped old Gillen. (Frank Gillen was a legendary post-master who made remarkable records about the Arrernte 1875-1901).

My father and those other old men, all finished now, they told me about those old prospectors, all looking about for gold. Early days, Arltunga. He was riding the horse early days, in the cattle, in the country where he was born, and at Hermannsburg. They used to cut the hide off the bullock and stretch it out; old Richard Mokatarinja used to plait leather belts and make greenhide ropes and hobbles. And he was an artist too. And old Ted Abbott, he made saddles; they were beautiful saddles with studs. Old Ted Abbott, I watched him make the saddles, and leather belts. Graham Ross makes the plaited belts now..

Army time my father was working again. Everyone they needed that water. There used to be an old well where the K-Mart car park is, but they put tar over it. There used to be another one near that old Heavitree Gap police-station near the pepper trees. They covered it in, but they should have put a fence around it. They all used that water. All the people in the town, and all the people out bush and all the people in the town camps. We have got good water here at my house, everyone at Larapinta Camp has good water.

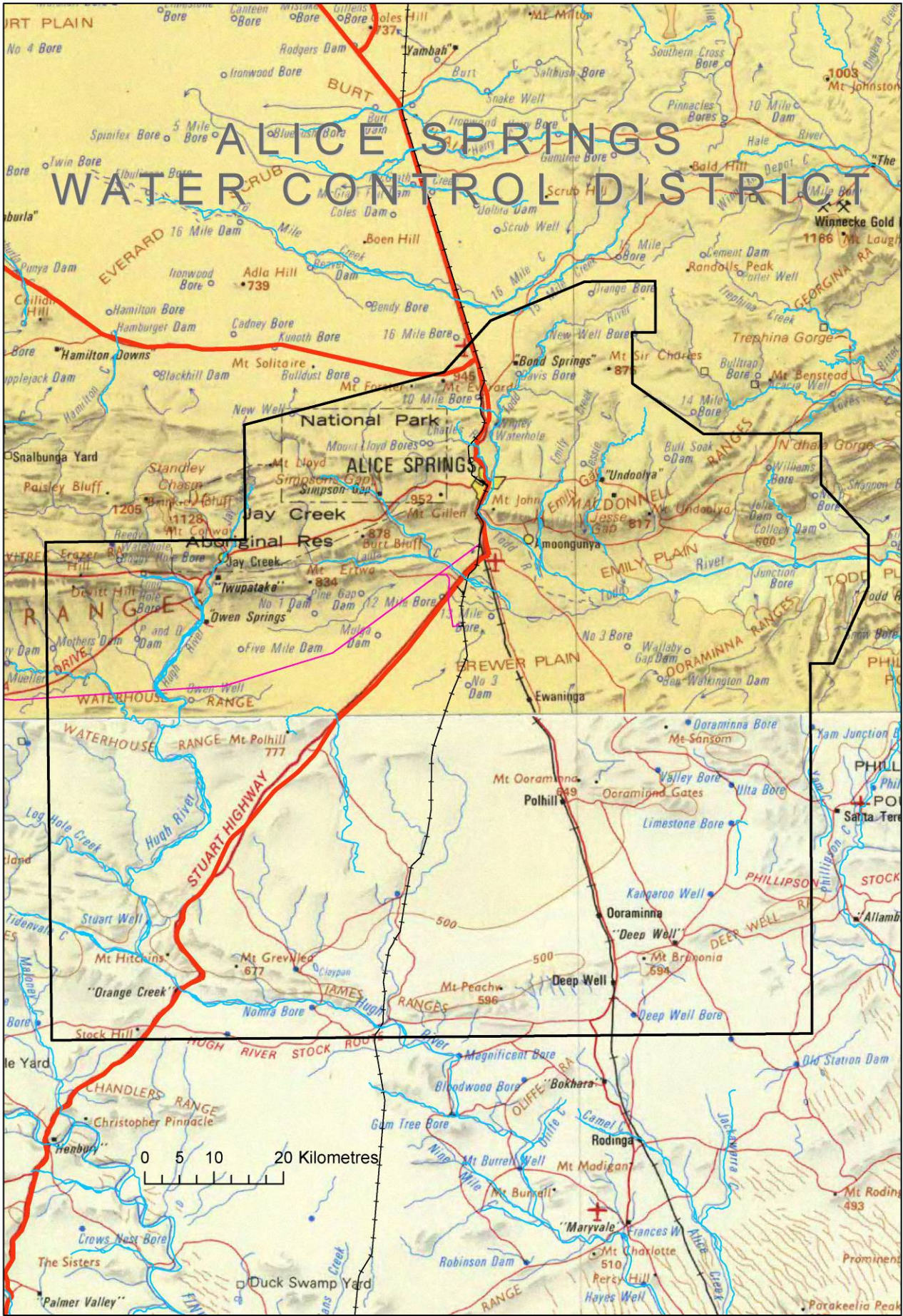
My father helped Mike Smith (the archaeologist). He was looking for those early day old Arrernte places, near the good water.

Now I follow my father. I am a board member at Yipirinya School; we are going to get a boarding school there to look after the kids. I am a delegate to the Central Land Council. I am an executive member of Tangentyere and an executive member of Four Corners.

Everyone has a story about water. This is old Dick's story about the Alice Springs country water. My father and all of those old Arrernte people, all finished up now, they helped him. I helped him.

*Meavyn Rubuntja*





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## Introduction

Wenten Rubuntja had an individual, at times unique, view of the world. He was one of several old custodians of Alice Springs and associated areas I came to know in the 1970's. We became acquainted through Australian Rules football in 1970, he having played for an original Amoonguna team (now Souths) and I being the first captain-coach of Melanka (now Wests). He was a well-known artist of the Namatjira style of painting, and we intermittently met thereafter, once I particularly remember at an initiatory camp for one of Victor Palmer's sons near the Charles River junction with the Todd River. We became friends when we worked together to identify Aboriginal people of diverse backgrounds living in the informal town camps in the mid-1970's. Thereafter he was a key figure associated with the Central Land Council, Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority ("Sacred Sites"), Office of Reconciliation, Yipirinya School and many other Aboriginal organisations, and assisted me with work associated with the recording of site names in and about Alice Springs. I appreciated his work ethic, artistic talent, concerns for his family and the entire community of Alice Springs, his forward-looking attitude, his enjoyment of life and his sense of humour.

I recall that, referring to the Aboriginal and "white" populations of Alice Springs, he once said to me, "We must work together, my good boy. We got to be like the two train-lines. That train, he cannot run on just one line."



*Boys playing in Todd River circa 1948  
Photo taken by May Burrows*

He had an extraordinarily detailed knowledge about the songs and "Dreamings" of Alice Springs, and the large stained glass window at the Araluen Centre, based on his art, illustrates his understandings. I remember travelling with him in 1975 when he directed me all about the town and discussed it as though there was not a building on it. All he saw were Dreaming sites, and in addition to such as the Two Snakes from Emily Gap, the Dingo, Green Beetles, Euro and Kestrel, we discussed the nature of the Caterpillar types that had created much of the landscape.

Three of the most important Caterpillars are a brightly coloured caterpillar called *utnerrengatye*, a name which



derives from their concentrations on the emu bush, *utnerrenge* *Eremophila longifolia*; the green and brightly striped *yeparenye* which appear in crawling, nibbling millions after good rains; and the less common large green *ntyarlke*, with two large “eyes”, which Wenten likened to a Volkswagen car. While all are creator ancestors for parts of the landscape of Alice Springs and much further afield, they also have special areas of their own, most of local prominence also being associated with water, even though the water is often more assumed than stated. For instance at Alice Springs waterhole, although the waterhole was created where the Euro (hill kangaroo) dug for water there, as euros still do in the late afternoons as the waterhole dries up, the granite hill abutting it is associated with the Caterpillars.



*Telegraph Station Waterhole – date unknown ©Boerner Collection, NT Library*



*Telegraph Station Waterhole (Atherreyurre) 2011*

Wenten directed me past the large *Ankerre Ankerre* coolibah swamp claypans created by all of them coming together from all directions – the *yeparenye* of the Western Arrernte from as far away as Mount Zeil - to celebrate by dancing at that site. (These large claypans had much saltbush growing about their edges, but were bare until the late 1970's when, after deliberate seeding, the saltbush began to dramatically increase). Annie Meyer Hill and the Sadadeen Range were also pointed out by Wenten as associated with the Caterpillar Dreaming, and since that time the adjoining graves of both Lilian Hablett (1881-1905) and her son Mort Conway (1903-2001), traditional custodians of Alice Springs, have had plaques placed at the head, and been formally protected with a steel-framed cage at the base of Annie Meyer Hill. They were both born at the Alice Springs Telegraph Station. There having been no previous formal acknowledgement of the location of the site of Mort's mother's grave for decades, Mort had determined it while in his 80's as best he could recall it, with assistance from related family members who were present at the funeral, including Milton Liddle. I had come to know Mort, a legendary Kidman drover, increasingly well from the early 1970's, and was honoured to be requested by Mort's son Ian to deliver the eulogy at Old Mort's funeral.

We drove from the coolibah swamp to “that judge's hill” opposite the hospital on Gap Road, the former home (since destroyed) of a magistrate having been built on its crest. This was and still is a sacred hill-site, home of *Ntyarlke*, abutting the Todd and with a rock-bar stretching into the River from it representing the direction that the *Ntyarlke* “Boss” Caterpillar took as he led the *ntyarlke* caterpillars east. It is called *Ntyarlkarle Tyaneme*. Even though it is barely noticed by most people who live in or visit town these days, it is one of the most sacred sites for the Caterpillar Dreaming in the general Alice Springs area. It extends beyond Leichhardt Terrace in a low rocky outcrop on the edge of the Todd, and nearby is a soakage where first I met old Sid Ross, singer of the Caterpillar, Dingo and other songs. Although “Old Sid” was generally associated with Undoolya and Emily Gap, the day that I met him he emphasised his rights through strong Dreaming associations with *Ntaripe* (Heavitree Gap). Although all Caterpillar sites are imbued with sacredness, as Wenten, Sid and his brothers Claude and Peter all stated, *Ntaripe* and Emily Gap are the two most significant Caterpillar Dreaming sites. Traditionally no women or children were permitted to enter either Gap, but could pass through the ranges at different gaps or cross over at a saddle a short distance east of *Ntaripe*.

Wenten next told me to cross the Todd at the golf-course causeway and as we drove back along Leichhardt Terrace he pointed out certain old red-river gums that represented the *kwekatje* pre-initiated big boys who travelled from the south across the range between Heavitree Gap and Mount Gillen, and followed the Todd River north. After crossing the causeway we drove down Barrett Drive until he asked me to stop near a small ridge that once extended from closer to the Todd River than it does today. It is another Caterpillar Dreaming, and its tail was blown off during road construction at a time before the Sacred Sites Authority had significant influence. It is easy to forget, when looking at this ridge and reading the sign that states that it is a registered sacred site, that it led from the Todd River, with a soakage nearby. Additionally, although barely visible now because of golf-course modifications and Barrett Drive, when Wenten and I visited there was quite a prominent little creek-line that ran from the low Caterpillar hills to the immediate east across the golf-course



fairway and beside the ridge into the Todd. It was the route taken by the Caterpillar ancestors as they travelled east.



*Todd River (Artepe Ulpaye) late 1940s. Photo taken by May Burrows*

Old photographs show that the coolibah surrounded claypan area that is now Traeger Park oval, with old coolibah trees there representing the *kwekatje* uninitiated boys, once extended to the present hospital site. Both Walter Smith and his sister Ada Wade said that there had been a good shallow-water well near the back of the hospital in the old days, and another near Billygoat Hill. Other *kwekatje* youths are represented by coolibahs near the Larapinta Drive railway crossing.

A consequence of the *yeparenye* caterpillar association with much of Alice Springs is that probably a majority of local people in Alice Springs are both conceived in and born in *yeparenye* country, and the hospital (where most births occur) has become associated with the *yeparenye*. On several occasions over the years Wenten asked after my son and daughter. “How those little *Yeparenye* Caterpillars going, my good boy?” Wenten always incorporated any child he knew had been born in the Alice Springs hospital in this way. “They got to look after this country now”, he often said. “Little Arrernte mob, little whitefellow mob, whole lot. All the little *yeparenye*, they all the same”.

And twice he commented to me over the years in his own unique way about the Todd River.

“That Bond Springs country, that’s his head for that Todd River. All the spring country, and rock-holes, all that Wigley Waterhole country and soakages. And that river he got a line [the river-bed], that’s his backbone. And town area, that



his flanks. Good country that one, grow anything. His hips been *Ntaripe*, Heavitree Gap.”



*Aerial view of Alice Springs ©2009 Northern Territory Government*

That the “flanks” were “good country” was emphasised by the fact that not only was the original town site and then its extensions south to “the Gap” area (meaning Heavitree Gap) and the older area of the of the “East side” built there, but more significantly, in Wenten’s childhood there were many “shallow-water” wells with small windmills erected there. Almost everyone planted fruit trees and grew vegetables, with Charlie Sadadeen’s grape-vines where the Town Council’s car-park is now located, his date palms at the front lawns of the council chambers brought from Oodnadatta as saplings by Walter Smith in about 1915, and Ah Hong’s vegetable



garden near the present Memorial Club, particularly remembered by all old-timers born 1890's-1930. Windmills were still common throughout the town in 1970, and along the Ross Highway were the Pitchi Richi sanctuary, the Date Farm and thriving market gardens, now mostly transformed into caravan parks and rural blocks.

Because I knew that the Charles River joined the Todd between the town centre and the Old Telegraph Station and that there were tributaries further towards Bond Springs, I asked him about them. The Charles River was one of his arms, and the masses of smaller tributaries were his hair. Knowing also that the Todd swung away to the east after passing through Heavitree Gap and by Mount Blatherskite (also associated with the Caterpillar Dreaming and the buttocks area), I next asked about this. "Legs straight south, Dick, all the way to Ooraminna Rockhole." As with many sites in Arrernte country and the wider desert country of Australia, it is the linking of water supplies that is of immense significance. The Todd River having very few soakage sites along its length after leaving Heavitree Gap, the link Wenten made was with the long-lasting Ooraminna Rockhole, reliable water approximately thirty kilometres to the south.



*Facing south towards Ntaripe (Heavitree Gap) with Todd River in foreground 2011*

Wenten and I continued our drive through *Ntaripe* (Heavitree Gap), associated with both the Caterpillars and the Dingo Dreaming, and as is often forgotten, also the Two Snakes Dreaming; Wenten was the only person I knew who regularly mentioned the Two Snakes who had travelled back-and-forth from Emily Gap, for the Caterpillar stories have tended to dominated in recent decades.

As we passed through the Gap he pointed out an old tree on the eastern side, then intact but now only a burnt relic, and said, "There is old Sidi Ross now." I was

interested to know this as old Mort Conway had told me that he identified himself with the aged redgum *Kwekatje* tree that is a registered sacred site, outside the former Stuart Arms hotel, which was replaced with the Alice (then Ford) Plaza shopping centre in 1985-1986. This identification was because it was, as I understood him, both his conception site and because his mother Lilian had died there.

Next, as we crossed the Heavitree Gap causeway, he indicated the Green Beetle Dreaming red-gums, the actual green beetles being attackers of the caterpillars which thrive after good rains.

And so it went until I dropped him off at Amoonguna, where he lived at the time.

It was Francis (Frank) Stevens, a senior Arrernte traditional custodian in the early 1970's, who first told me of the Rain Dreaming that comes in from the west through the vicinity of Pine Gap before sweeping south through Ooraminna and beyond. Stuart Oliver, born on the south side of Heavitree Gap, independently confirmed this, as did Wenten Rubuntja, Walter Smith, Willie Smith, and other senior men. It was a few years later that I also understood that there was a reciprocal sense of the Rain Dreaming; from Ooraminna the Rain Boss had marched north and west along the same route, joining all of the other Rain Dreaming ancestors who came from north, south and west at Koporilya Springs near Hermannsburg.

In 1970 Francis Stevens was also the first person to comment to me about the Emu Dreaming from the Bond Springs country to Jessie Gap; the Dingo Dreaming coming out of the Simpson Desert to Heavitree Gap before trotting on to Mount Gillen, the Mount being his nose beneath which is an actual old dingo's den-site, then returning north-east via a line of white quartz to the dingo bitch's den-site and finally to "Dog Rock" in town; the Perenti Dreaming from the Hale River and Arltunga country via Corroboree Rock to the Bat Caves (fenced off during the realignment of the Ghan train-line in 1980-81) south of Alice Springs to Simpsons Gap; and to the Rock Wallaby Dreaming at Trepkina Gorge<sup>1</sup>.

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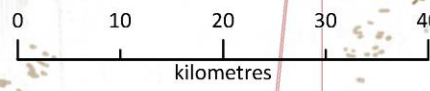
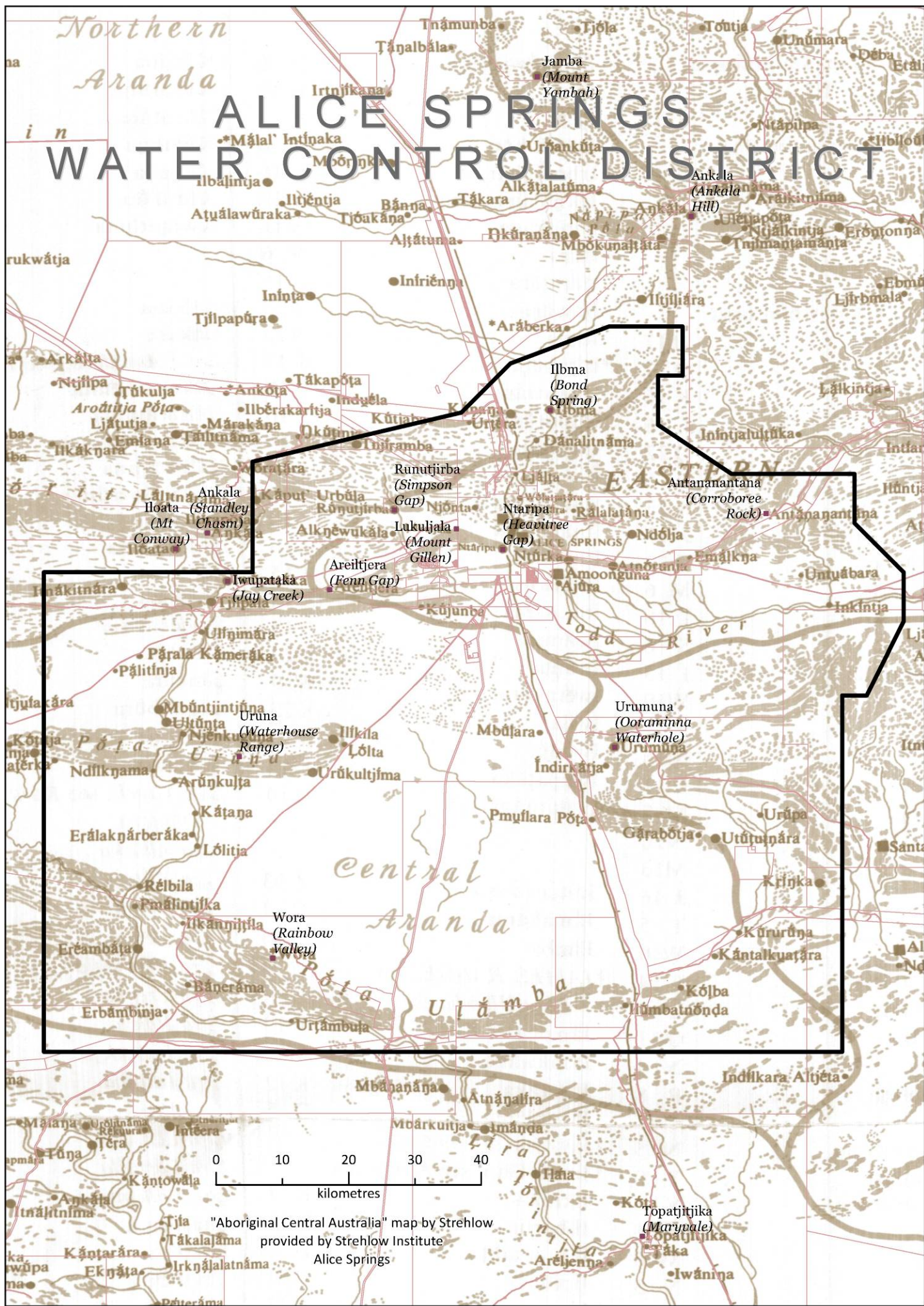
<sup>1</sup> There is an incorrect perception that was presented at Araluen in early 2011, which is that the Dingo "Dreaming" is possibly/probably in fact a Thylacine "Dreaming". If this recent suggestion had any merit I would support it as a possibility. However having talked quite specifically about this "Dreaming" with the oldest senior people of knowledge in the 1970's (Sid Ross, Claude Ross, Eli Rubuntja, Francis Stevens, Mort Conway, Walter Smith, Amelia Kunoth, Maude Nichols and others), and visited significant local sites with them or climbed to where they pointed them out, as well as read the old literature and discussed Spencer and Gillen with some of the above-mentioned people, I am entirely confident in expressing my support for these oldest knowledgeable Arrernte. They all stated that Dingo "Dreaming" ancestors were the creators of various features in and about Alice Springs, having come from a long distance east and west before arriving here. This was also the situation which prevailed at the time of discussions about the building of the Desert Park and at the time of the Arrernte Native Title claim, by which time many of the above-mentioned were deceased and a younger generation, including Wenten Rubuntja, Kumantjayi B. Stewart, and recently deceased members of the Stevens family were among those involved. From a note in friend Mike Gillam's gallery in Hele Crescent it appears that an unnamed Top End Aboriginal convinced Kumantjayi Stewart and a member of the Stevens family a few years ago that the Dingo Dreaming was a Thylacine Dreaming. To suggest or state that it is not a Dingo "Dreaming", without a skerrick of tendered proof other than this unnamed Top End Aboriginal man's perception is, in my view, to potentially undermine the Arrernte Alice Springs Native Title Claim and the respect that people generally have for it.



. As a final comment, while talking about Alice Springs, Wenten incorporated the country all about through the Rain Dreaming sites during his “Talking History” account. Although he used a mixture of Arrernte and European names it was again as though no European boundaries had ever existed.

“The rainmakers just go to country like Yambah, Hayes Springs, Santa Theresa and all them and Aileron, and make rain. Or MacDonald Downs, the rain country. Then they used to make rain. Then the big rains come, make everyone happy.” (“Land Rights News”, May 1992: 22).

# ALICE SPRINGS WATER CONTROL DISTRICT



"Aboriginal Central Australia" map by Strehlow  
provided by Strehlow Institute  
Alice Springs



## The Alice Springs Water Control District

In studying the map of the Alice Springs Water Control District together with the T.G.H. Strehlow map (1971) it can be seen that, from the point-of-view of residents of Alice Springs and the near environment, the main river is *Lhere Mparntwe*, the Todd. *Lhere* means river or creek, and this is a local name derived from a sacred site, *Mparntwe*, several hundred metres north of Heavitree Gap (Henderson and Dobson, 1994: 478). The entire Todd River is called *Lhere Imatukua* (Strehlow, 1971, Map). However because there are no major ranges along its route once it leaves Heavitree Gap and Mount Blatherskite, there are no rock-bars to act as entrapments for water, and few named sites exist along its route beyond Amoonguna.



*Hugh River near Orange Creek 2011*

To the west there is, in many ways, a more significant river, *Lhere Totinja*, the Hugh, which has larger and more dependable gorge rock-holes and waterholes than the Todd, and also has several reliable soakages. It has the advantage of two water-entrapping ranges to the south of its head-waters, the small but important *Apwerte Uruna* (Waterhouse) Range in which is Owen Springs, with a Zebra Finch Dreaming nearby, and further south the significantly larger *Apwerte Ulamba* (James) Range. *Apwerte*, spelt *aputa* in older references, means “stone, rock, rocky hill or range”, depending on the context, and old Arrernte people of the 1870’s-1970’s also used it to refer to coins because of their similarity to small stones in their hardness.

The *Apwerte Ulamba* (or *Urlampe*) Range is associated, along with other Dreamings, with the Rain Dreaming. This Range extends a considerable distance east, and gave its name to an old man called *Ulambarinya* Hayes, grandfather of many

of the present Hayes family and linguist-translator Veronica Dobson, and also to Allambi station, immediately south of Santa Teresa Mission. Although I never met old *Ulambarinya* (c.1890-c.1970), who along with Sid Ross (c. 1890-1976) was considered one of the last great old *Arretnte* men of encyclopaedic knowledge, I was fortunate to be able to travel from Alice Springs east via the Ross Highway, then south-east through cattle station country to Little Well and Todd River Downs station with his son *Wipilitj* Hayes (c. 1915-c.1985) and Old Walter Smith (1893- 1990) in 1981.

Although Little Well and Todd River Downs are at the end of the Todd River, including the flood-out country on the northern edge of the Simpson Desert, and are beyond the area under consideration, they have links to it. Little Well is both a Rain Dreaming site and associated with *Kwertatye* (*Kadaitcha*) executioners. Nearby a line of boulders represents one of the groups of *Urumbulla* youths who, having travelled north from Port Augusta, divided into four different travelling groups on the Lower Finke River at a sacred men's site I visited in 1988-1989 with Brownie Doolan (c. 1920-2010), before again travelling north through *Arretnte* country and beyond to Renner Springs. Although the *Urumbulla* youths are always also *Atyelpe* (*Achilpa*, the "native cat" or quoll), this identification with the *Atyelpe* seems to become stronger in *Arretnte* country, and is associated with a special men's law.



## **Traditional Arrernte Use of the Country during Seasonal Changes from Good Seasons to Drought**

The following comments are the result of personal observations and research, for I became interested in trying to better comprehend how both the Arrernte and the animals and birds used the country during droughts.

Just as regular rains and occasional major floods have occurred in Arrernte country since time immemorial, so too have less frequent short-term and long-term droughts. Although droughts can at times fluctuate in duration over quite short distances, they mostly have a very wide impact. There may be occasional very good falls of rain over brief periods during droughts, and there are no records of total failure of rain for a year. However droughts have been recorded in Central Australia in 1875-77, 1884-5, 1896-1906, 1914-15, 1925-1934, 1944-46, 1958-1965, 1985-1986, 2007-2009. The evidence suggests that extended severe droughts with major dust-storms occur roughly every thirty years.



*Dust Storm in Alice Springs 1965© Bonzle*

To illustrate how local can be the variations, in the area of the Alice Water District, although the 1958-1965 drought was widely broken by good rainfalls during 1965, the south and south-eastern portion to Ringwood station was under drought relief until 1971. At that time the Stuart Highway was only sealed from Alice Springs for the twelve km to the Space Base turn-off, and I remember that in late January 1970, on stopping to assist a driver who had lost a panel off his cattle-truck immediately north of Orange Creek, I became bogged in a sand-drift. At that time too, there was almost no grass and only the larger ironwoods, corkwoods, ghost gums, coolibahs and other trees relieved the sense of droughted country that still prevailed between the Alice Springs airport and the red-gums of Heavitree Gap. (Buffel grass hardly existed then). The dominant impression was of pink-red soil rather than

vegetation, something which only changed after the heavy rains of December 1971. Although 2009 was the driest year on record, the image of a largely bare pink-red desolation has never occurred since 1971 because of the increasing spread of buffel grass. And this aridity was virtually the same throughout in late 1970 when I made a circuit drive, several times having to dig myself out of sand-drift or bull-dust, from Alice Springs to Ross River then south to the Ringwood station road before returning to the Alice.

The earliest explorers, as a result of their earlier experiences in northern South Australia, had understood that there were precious permanent “fall-back” waters for the Arrernte, and that they moved out from them as soon as good rains fell elsewhere in their country. Springs such as Painter Spring (northern part of the map), which are either in or flowing out near the main ranges are normally the most reliable of the waters under consideration, but can fluctuate in flow during droughts. Most of the springs north along the Todd head-waters in the area of Bond Springs dry up altogether in a severe drought, and the Alice Springs<sup>2</sup>, as is well-known, were named in 1871, an exceptionally wet year, and are not actual springs. Waterholes and rockholes, although occasionally to be found in and about small isolated outcrops, are normally found in the rivers and their tributary creeks, mostly in or in proximity to the main ranges in which they originate or through which they pass. The permanent waterholes, such as that at Simpsons Gap, are rare waterholes with a rock base that are fed by a spring. On the other hand, Wigley’s Waterhole north of the Alice and Emily Gap waterhole to the east can last a few months, but become stagnant during this time and then dry up on the surface, although they can still provide soakage water. Similarly Junction Waterhole can last for about a year after a good rain, but the water is unusable long before then and drinkable soakage water must be sought in the sand near the edge. When a soakage had to be dug to any depth more than about a metre it was termed a “soakage well”.

There are no true lakes in the area of the Water District, but sizeable claypans can normally be found near the base of low hills, some of them surrounded by lignum or cane-grass, with the Ilparpa Claypans, the Ewaninga claypan and those at Rainbow Valley being good examples of large claypans. Although holding a considerable volume of water after good rains they are rarely more than one third to half a metre deep, and their large surface mean that the combination of the sun and wind cause rapid evaporation. Three months is a long time for such claypans to hold water if there is no top-up rain.

The explorers’ journals occasionally refer to native wells sunk into the claypans or creek-beds, but while I have records of surviving examples of these from a long way outside the area under consideration, I do not have any records of them surviving within the Water District. The same applies to records of native dams.

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<sup>2</sup> Telegraph Station waterhole





*Ewaninga Claypan 2010*

As a consequence of these fluctuations in availability of water to Arrernte people (and indeed all desert peoples), they had learnt to pulse with the seasonal and also drought availability of water. I remember travelling to Ooraminna Rockhole with Walter Smith, his brother Willie, his sister Ada Wade and also my son Steven in about 1982, when the rockhole was full, and later discussing with Walter both the local Dreamings (including *Urumbulla* youths and Rain) and what happened when the rockhole and soakage a little further south dried up. He explained that well before they totally dried the old men of the resident group determined that everyone had to retreat to the main ranges. After a last good drink in the early morning and with the women carrying deep wooden water-carrying bowls called coolamons, the families set out. The men, normally carrying two spears and a woomera (spear-thrower), took a slightly different route to the women and chattering children, for they needed quietness if stalking a kangaroo feeding on the edges of the light mulga country.



*Ooraminna Rockhole 1950 © Boerner Collection, NT Library*

The easiest walking route was beyond the confines of the hard rocks of the Ooraminna Rockhole and Range on the loamy and sandy soil of the main creek-line, which exits the range not far from Ewaninga claypan, then north from Ewaninga to a deep circular claypan used in the 1920's by cameleer Charlie Sadadeen as a water-supply for a market garden, and then on to Roe Creek. Although the two claypans would by this time be dry, plant-foods, goannas and occasional other small animals could be gathered and hunted along the way. Their route north could be either to the east or west of the rolling limestone hills that represent the clouds of the Rain Dreaming, depending on whether they had determined to travel to *Ntaripe* (Heavytree Gap) or Simpson's Gap. Although the distances could, if necessary, be managed in a long day's walk, it was more common to take a leisurely two days. A soakage in Roe Creek near the ghost gums of the Perenti Dreaming, or immediately north of Pine Gap, or near Attack, Honeymoon or Fenn Gap, allowed the travel to readily be broken into two or three stages.

An illustration of such travel in harder conditions is given by Charles Chewings, an intelligent and observant bushman-explorer, geologist, pastoralist and cameleer businessman who first visited the Alice Springs and Owen Springs country in 1881-1882 and thereafter came to know the land from Deep Well north to Ooraminna, then to Arltunga and Alice Springs, very well when he became a cameleer.

[The] natives of central Australia --- possess very remarkable faculties of observation, and good reasoning powers, more particularly as regards the means whereby they subsist. They know the habits of every living thing around them, great or small."

"The principal food --- in the driest and sandier parts of the interior are snakes, lizards, berries, leaves of shrubs, seeds of *Acacia*, *munyeroo* and *paraakeelia*-



seeds, grass-seeds, yams, mulga apples, rats [meaning native rats to Desert Bandicoots and Hare wallabies], and grubs that at certain seasons of the year are found on the leaves of trees and bushes – largely of *Acacia* species.” (1936: 9-10).

Although Chewings correctly states that “[they] rarely get a kangaroo, wallaby, or emu” in the “desolate regions”, Old Walter said that there was always a possibility of one or more of these being speared by the men, as well as euros (hill kangaroos), echidnas and, until about the 1920’s, mallee fowls, between Ooraminna Rockhole and the MacDonnell Ranges. Honey ants could also be dug out in the mulga country; and witchetty grubs were also normally available in quantities when the women dug up the shallow laterally spreading roots of witchetty bushes.

Chewings continues:

“Where plenty of food is to be found, that spot to them is heavenly, provided water to slake their thirst is within reach.

Stony or spinifex country, or parts thickly strewn with bindi-eyes --- [large prickles] or spiky grass-seeds, that make their feet sore when hunting or travelling, are to them an abomination. One often sees the native trail composed of only a single individual’s tracks for those that follow tread on his tracks to avoid the burrs.” (Ibid: 11).

Apart from a few which pass over rocky country, most of the predominantly Aboriginal created and used walking pads in and about Alice Springs from the 1970’s to 2011 do not have such concerns. They provide easy walking along road-sides or river and creek-lines.

This discussion of what happened in drought contrasts with that which traditionally occurred during conventional years and the times of above-average rains. People spread out from the fall-back waters to the recently filled peripheral waters to which they had customary rights, initially having hard times for a month or so before the burgeoning of edible plants, insects, amphibians, reptiles, fish, birds and other mammals. Charles Chewings again provides good, brief illustrations.

“With the sure knowledge that they can find food when they go forth to hunt to-morrow, they make the best and most of the present.

And so we find them a happy-go-lucky people, merry and fond of amusement, with a keen sense of the ridiculous.” (1936:9).

“Natives in their camp-life, their search for food, and in travels generally of necessity meet each other in all sorts of places. Some who they meet belong to groups that are blood or tribal relatives; others belong to groups that etiquette permits friendly speech with at a distance; others again to groups that are strictly taboo to one another.”

“In addition to the above there are pre-arranged meetings, at recognised [traditional] depots, between sections of the same tribe who live far apart, or with a friendly neighbouring tribe. These have no cult significance, being for barter or exchange of commodities that occur, or can be made, in certain parts of the country and not in others. For instance red ochre is available from the south side of the Levis Range, and soft-wood trays are made where Stuart’s bean-tree --- grows, in and north of the MacDonnell Ranges. The exchanges, for the most part, take place in weapons, implements, personal decoration commodities, and such like. Tjoritja (Alice Springs) is one of those exchange places.” (1936: 19-20).

As Spencer and Gillen also recorded, the vicinity of the Alice Springs waterhole was a place where major ceremonial gatherings also took place from time to time (Spencer and Gillen, 1968 [1899]).



*Aboriginal men at the Telegraph Station 1906 © Smith Collection, NT Library*



## Arrernte Place-Names on the Area of the Water District as Signifiers of Water

Much as European names have often been applied to rivers, springs and waterholes in the country of the Water District, indicating instant early “white-fellow” recognition of their significance, the rivers and other water sources always have an Arrernte name of much greater age. David Brooks’ booklet, “The Arrernte Landscape of Alice Springs” (1991), gives modern Arrernte spellings and interpretations of the sites and “Dreamings” of significance in and about Alice Springs, and other examples, using the Strehlow spellings on his 1971 map, are *Lira Imarukya* for the entire Todd River and *Nturka* for Emily Gap. European names were always applied before there was friendly contact between the two peoples, but early examples of recognition of Arrernte names (spelt in an old-style way) are those of Undoolya for the cattle station immediately east of Alice Springs, and Ooraminna for the rockhole and range to the south.

There are occasional problems or traps though. For instance “Painter” was sometimes spelt “Painta” on old maps, and instead of honouring some unknown friend of explorer Winnecke who named it, the name is probably his old phonetic spelling of the Arrernte word for spring, now spelt *pirnte* or *pintye* (Henderson and Dobson, 1994: 743). And Araluen, although often thought to be an Aboriginal word, is almost certainly an English word, deriving from an old poem about “the vale of Araluen” being applied to the late Eddie Connellan’s home site in New South Wales, and later applied by him to his home where the Araluen Arts Centre now stands. Ewaninga is an Aboriginal name derived from another Aboriginal language, probably from the Murray or Darling rivers.

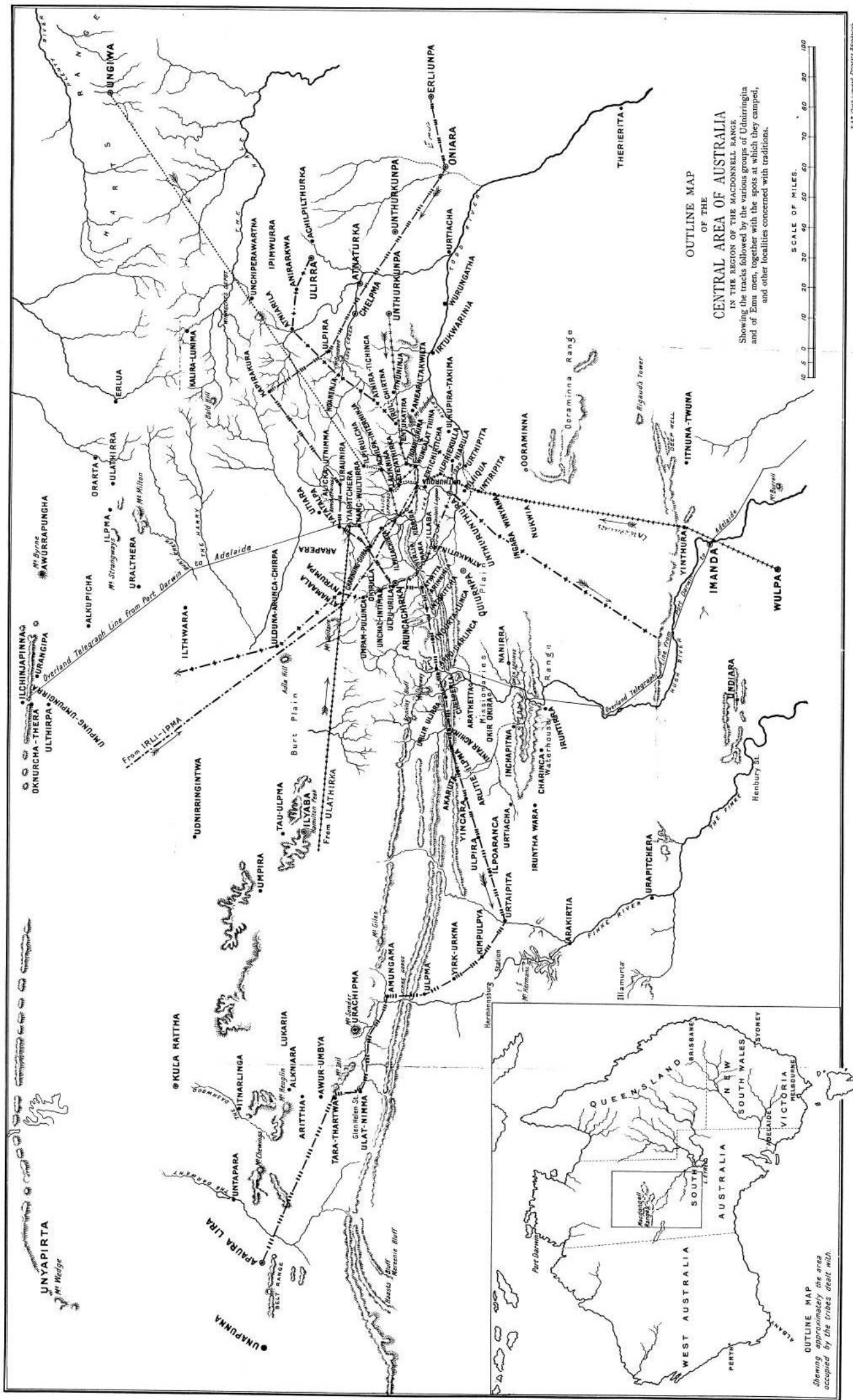
It is worth noting, too, that Spencer and Gillen, having noted that “[every] feature in the landscape has its special name”, illustrated this by commenting, “each different kind of waterhole is distinguished”. They recorded seventeen different names for different kinds of major Arrernte water supplies, these including the Arrernte name for a claypan, a soakage, a spring, a large waterhole, a waterhole surrounded by tall bullrushes, a muddy waterhole, a rock-hole, and so-on. (Spencer and Gillen, Vol.1, 1927:22).

As earlier indicated it would be superfluous to consider the many names recorded by Spencer and Gillen in their recognition of the “Totemic Topography” of the area of Alice Springs Native Title (Ibid: 88-99), and the many additional names within the same area that the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority and Central Land Council have in their records. And, since the Strehlow map can be reproduced, it is also superfluous to copy it. However, in brief summary, there are well over one hundred names in the area of the Alice Springs Native Title claim, and there are approximately seventy Arrernte place-names beyond, most of them sites with water, but some being range or hill names, and some being significant trees (Strehlow, T.G.H. 1971, Map).

The various sites are linked by the Dreaming Trails, as is indicated by just a few illustrations from the Spencer and Gillen map of 1899. This map was drawn up

by the two men after Frank Gillen's discussions and travels with the most senior men of knowledge throughout 1875-1896. However, the natural geographical form of the land had clearly influenced these Dreaming trails, and had determined where people travelled. It is no accident that the walking pads noticed by all explorers were largely along the river and creek lines and through the gorges. These walking pads allowed for the most comfortable walking along largely shaded ways between waters, and also allowed access to the favoured land for hunting and gathering. They still prevail in modified fashion through Heavitree Gap, where the walking trails from all Arrernte and other communities from Amoonguna to the vicinity of 8HA radio station converge and become highly defined before radiating out to various parts of the town via the Todd River's and Chinaman Creek's banks and then conventional roads. Similarly there are walking trails from the north along the Charles Creek-banks and the several cement-lined or modified creek-lines through town.

*Overleaf: Spencer & Gillen Outline Map of the Central Area of Australia 1899 (1968)*



OUTLINE MAP  
OF THE  
CENTRAL AREA OF AUSTRALIA

IN THE REGION OF THE MACDONNELL RANGE  
Showing the tracks followed by the various groups of Unbirringia  
and of Emu men, together with the spots at which they camped,  
and other localities concerned with traditions.



OUTLINE MAP  
Showing approximately the area  
occupied by the tribes dealt with.



## Consideration of the Water Control District in Terms of Broad Arrernte Ownership.

*Erlkintera* of the *Achilpa* (Quoll or Native Cat) totem, *Erpolingarinia* of the Emu totem, *Ingelilba* of the Snake totem, *Eruramunga* of the Fly totem, *Arai-iga* [Arriaka] of the Emu totem, *Intwailiuka* of the *Udnirringita* “Emu-bush” Caterpillar totem, *Apiliquirka* of the Little Hawk totem, *Irritcha* of the Wedge-tailed Eagle totem, *Unjailga* of the Big Green Caterpillar totem (grandfather of Rosalie Kunoth-Monks)<sup>3</sup>, and *Erti-cherti-churinga* of the Witchetty Grub totem were among the most senior men of 1896, probably all born between 1815-35, who taught Frank Gillen about their Law (Spencer and Gillen, Vol.1, 1927, Fig.2, Vol.11:583). Gillen was the local post-master, who had already spent twenty one years learning the language (mostly southern Arrernte at first), and was the first white Australian to begin to also learn the local and “tribal” group boundaries, and other aspects of Arrernte culture in the Mbantua, Choritja, Undoolya, (his old spellings) of the Alice Springs general area and beyond. However, although generally defining the boundaries of the Arrernte sub-groups, it was not until T.G.H. Strehlow and Norman Tindale made their own investigations in Central Australia during the late 1920’s-50’s period, with Tindale pulling Gillen’s and other information together (and Strehlow also knowing such records), that good understandings of the Arrernte land ownership became known to the wider public.

Tindale’s 1974 map, using his spellings, indicates that local groups of Eastern Aranda, Western Aranda, Northern Aranda and Central Aranda are the traditional land-owners involved in the country of the Water District. They are part of the larger total Arrernte people who, while recognising some strong linguistic and land owner differences between them, have - particularly since the Native Title hearings - increasingly referred to themselves as the Arrernte nation. T.G.H.Strehlow, who began collecting information after Tindale but published his map a little earlier, agreed in general with Tindale, but disagreed in the detail. He has Eastern Aranda (north) and Eastern Aranda (south) instead of just Eastern Aranda, and has also placed Alice Springs a little further west in Eastern Aranda country (Strehlow, 1971, Map). When first I arrived here in 1970 I thought Alice Springs seemed a natural place for Central Aranda but Strehlow’s map of 1971 indicated that I was wrong. I checked with several old men late in 1971, and found that he was correct. Alice Springs is definitely in traditional Eastern Arrernte country, although many Arrernte people today refer to it as Central Arrernte.

The Native Title Act 1993 recognises prior rights of Aboriginal people to country (so long as claimants can prove it) to hunt over, gather traditional foods in and have access to their sacred sites in country occupied by citizens of cities like Darwin and Alice Springs, pastoral lands and other forms of tenure, but all rights of all people are recognised. The crucial phrase in the Act when custodians make a

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<sup>3</sup> I have specifically mentioned this relationship because the late Kumantjayi G. Williams of Hermannsburg had a grandfather from Western Aranda country of the same name. As far as is known the two men never met. Such identical names, though belonging to different people from different country, can sometimes cause confusion. In the case of the Pintupi this problem was resolved by three men of identical name being called Anatjari Number One, Anatjari Number Two and Anatjari Number Three.

Native Title claim is that they must be able to prove “continuous connection” to the country under claim. This is a distinguishing element, contrasting with the prior Aboriginal Land Rights Act (N.T.), 1976 under which people have to prove “primary spiritual responsibility”.

The Alice Springs –Undoolya-Bond Springs area of the Alice Springs Native Title Claim was called the “Alice Springs Arrernte Native Title Determination Application” and was prepared and presented by the Central Land Council on behalf of the custodians in mid-year 1997. Although the public could attend almost all hearings and travel to all but highly sacred sites, and television and local newspaper reports of the hearing regularly occurred, because of restrictions which still apply to the formal documents nothing of major significance is available to the public as a major reference, so the following brief summary from my recall is given. I have omitted the names of some people who assisted because I either do not recall their names or do not know their role.

It was the first such claim in Australia, and was formally opposed by the Northern Territory Government. They used independent historian Peter Donovan and the excellent 1870’s records of Telegraph Station and cattle station boundaries, and 1888 to mid-1990’s boundaries for the town of Alice Springs (initially named Stuart) tenure provided by N. T. Government surveyor Keith Mooney-Smith to oppose it. Keith’s map also allowed the lawyers for the CLC to use the detailed references to the Arrernte claimants’ advantage. Tom Pauling, Q.C. (now the NT Administrator) and an associate were the N.T. Government’s legal representatives. Justice Olney was the judge appointed to weigh up the evidence, and it being the first such case, with a sizeable number of citizens of Alice Springs fearing that their own back yards were under threat of being lost to them, he clearly had to allay such fears while remaining independent, weighing up the evidence both for and against the claim, and making a decision. He questioned the evidence himself when there appeared to be rare uncertainty; and the Government legal team also questioned much of it to clarify aspects of the Native Title Act or to give emphasis to perspectives on different kinds of titles, easements and so-on.



*View of Alice Springs looking south towards Heavitree Gap 2011*

I was hired by the Central Land Council as an independent historian to write the history using whatever references I could locate in both old Government files and published historical references, while anthropologist Dr John Morton, assisted by anthropologist Rod Hagen, began working with claimants to record their oral history memories of ancestors' names (normally the oldest people remembered their grandparents' names, but rarely their great grandparents) and their custodial rights and responsibilities to key sites. Anthropologist Dr. Petronella Wafer was hired to assist Arrernte women with their special women's evidence; and linguist Jenny Green and translator Rosie Ferber (herself a claimant) were also used to assist the judge to comprehend statements, songs and other comments in Arrernte. Ross Howie was the leading lawyer used by the Central Land Council, with Rod Hagen one of the assisting anthropologists.

I was able to use the Spencer and Gillen records, most particularly the photographs of the oldest named people of the 1890's and their recorded affiliations to key sites and Dreamings, as well as many old historical references and such as cemetery records, to present evidence to the judge of associations throughout the area under claim "for untold generations" as the explorer Barclay had put it (1905: 445). And in a more refined way, on the basis of reasonable estimates of ages of senior Arrernte photographed by Spencer and Gillen, from about 1820-1840. Other references allowed connections to be made throughout the intervening years to the mid-1990's. John Morton used the same references and the unpublished genealogical material collected by linguist T.G.H. Strehlow to make connections between the claimants, their known ancestors and ancestors beyond most people's recall.

The most important people were the Arrernte claimants, who were aware, as were all others directly involved or with a general interest, that if this claim, with so much excellent information available, did not succeed, it was doubtful whether any other would succeed anywhere in Australia. I recall that no-one was at all welcome if they were even mildly intoxicated, and was greatly impressed by the integrity of all people who gave evidence, both at the public hearings a short distance east of Heavitree Gap and wherever the judge travelled. Unfortunately although the families are generally known, the details of this excellent study by John Morton remain restricted information unless, as has occasionally happened, senior individuals have wished their own genealogy to be more widely understood. (Lilian Hablett's and Mort Conway's grave-plaques give such family details). While all of the people mentioned are descended from Arrernte people, they often have adapted names from such as early Alice Springs Overland Telegraph Station staff; cattle station workers and occasionally Afghan cameleers of the 1870's-1920's. I had come to know many of the people through teaching them, or playing football with and against them (almost all of the men) during 1970-80, and being further associated with Australian Rules football through to 2011, which also meant that I generally met their parents and other relations. Furthermore I came to know some through friendly associations with other people – Amelia Kunoth through Charlie Kunoth and Maude Nicholls through her neighbour friends Iris Mahomet and Margaret Hall. I have also had some as neighbours for a time (Dodds, Ansell and Hayes), attended ceremonies with some of them (most particularly Rubuntja, Palmer, Hayes, Ross and Johnson), discussed aspects of the old Spencer and Gillen records and travelled with some of the most senior of the men out of personal interest (Stevens, Edwards, Hayes, Kenny, Conway,



Stuart, Lynch, Oliver, Ellis, Rubuntja), and worked with some of them on various sacred site registrations, repatriation of sacred objects and other formal projects (Rubuntja, Stuart, Kenny, Oliver, Mulladad, Pearce, Ansell). Since the time of the Native Title hearings and Justice Olney's decision I have also had further formal work with some of them and several years as a representative of the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority (2003-2009), the latter of which directly and indirectly involved working with, or on behalf of, all custodians. Although not alone, the Stuart and Renehan families were particularly prominent in assisting in the sacred sites protection work within the town boundaries.

I also knew from friendly discussions over the decades that many of the families from *Mparntwe* (Alice Springs area) estate were inter-related through marriage to families from the other two estates, *Irlpme* (Bond Springs) and *Antulye* (Undoolya).

People I recall being involved in, or mentioned in, the public hearings included members of the following families for *Mparntwe* estate: Hayes, Johnson, Golder, Stirling, Palmer, Kunoth, Conway, Liddle, Spencer, Campbell, Stuart, Renehan, Kenny, Stevens, Rice, Turner, Ferber, Edwards and Lynch. In the case of *Irlpme* estate the families included Palmer, Tilmouth, Lynch, Williams, Kunoth, Ronson, Rubuntja, Perkins, Lake, Turner, Pearce, Ross, Alice, Mulladad, Bloomfield, Conway, Gillen and Edwards. And finally, some of the families I recall for the *Antulye* estate are those of Ross, Hayes, Oliver, Williams, Alice, Ellis, Breaden, Hughes, Costello, Kenny, Doolan, Perkins, Smith, Laughton, Cooper, Tilmouth, Ansell, Dodds, Wallace, Dobson, Swan, Rubuntja, Turner and Stuart.

This is certainly not all of the surnames of the people involved, but is a sizeable representative number.

As a brief illustration of the kinds of public hearings undertaken by Justice Olney, one of several which I attended out of interest was to Bond Springs station, where Lena Turner, Bessie Liddle and other senior women showed the judge and all present the old ration shed south-east of the main homestead; unrolled a painting to show the "Dreamings" connections to the area; referred to the bush tucker they had collected in their youth through to middle-age; and discussed their walking routes about the area and into Alice Springs. We then all drove into the Wigley's Waterhole area, a place known well to probably all, where the young children played while the old women pointed out the direction to their half-way camping area. The final stop was at the Old Telegraph Station, where Bessie sang the entire Dancing Women song cycle from far to the south-west of Tempe Downs station to north of the Old Telegraph Station.



*Wigleys Waterhole (Lyalthe) 1950s Photo taken by May Burrows*

Justice Olney listened to all such evidence throughout the area of the Native Title Claim, as well as all opposing evidence, and both he and the opposing NT legal representatives asked clarifying questions through the interpreters. When the European evidence of boundaries and the Arrernte evidence caused some confusion, (which was the case with the old Undoolya cattle station boundaries from which the Alice Springs Telegraph Station boundaries were formally excised in 1875), or when there were very occasional assertions made by claimants which were not supported by the documented evidence, Justice Olney made decisions which helped to clarify matters.

And in his final decisions in 1999, in essence he recognised that the claimants had strong and inalienable rights to their traditional country. This, of course, meant that they also had rights to all traditional waters, although such as the town basin's water supplies were also clearly shared rights and the Undoolya cattle station bores were acknowledged as for primary use for cattle by the Hayes family pastoralists. These pastoralists, their ancestors having arrived in central Australia in 1884, are the longest term pastoral family in central Australia, and after initially becoming the owners of Mount Burrell station (purchasing it from Sir Thomas Elder), later became the owners of Undoolya, Deep Well and Owen Springs stations (the latter since purchased by the NT Government as a reserve) at the time of the hearings. They thus had pastoral leaseholds over all but the Bond Springs part of the Native Title area under consideration, and still retain leasehold rights over much of the area of the Alice Springs Water District. That they had and still have good relations with the Arrernte for their entire time in central Australia, many of whom worked for them over the decades, was illustrated by the large number of people of local Arrernte descent who paid their respects, along with many others, by attending Billy Hayes funeral service on Friday, 6<sup>th</sup> May, 2011. Representatives of most of the families who have acknowledged rights under the Native Title Act were present.

There is some very good information available in the Alice Springs Arrernte Native Title Determination Application's reports about the three Alice Springs area groups, as well as by the CLC anthropologists about areas where successful homeland communities or living areas have been established between Alice Springs and Jay Creek; Undoolya and Loves Creek; Alice Springs and Deep Well; in the Rainbow Valley-Oak Valley to Titjikala area; and also out along the Todd River road as far as Little Well. Some of this information is readily accessible, some of it restricted. I have drawn upon both the well-known and relatively rare literature, all of which derives from discussions by interested people with the elders of the Arrernte and other associated people.

The Native Title Claim for the Irlpme (Bond Springs), Antulye (Undoolya) and Mparntwe (Alice Springs) estates is well-recorded in the claim records, with the names of all claimants of the time indicated, along with their ancestors through detailed genealogies. The *Iwepatheke* (Jay Creek) estate was also well-considered during the hearings as was the well-recorded *Kweywenpe* (Pine Gap) area. Similarly, not only are all town camp and other sites within the town boundaries recorded under their Arrernte names on a map contained in the anthropologist's report on Native Title, but also there is a publication which gives details of the local Alice Springs area "Dreamings" so that people with interests can be educated to better understandings of the importance of named sites (Brooks, 1991). There is also information available about sites such as Emily Gap, *Kweywenpe* (adjoining Pine Gap), Corroboree Rock, *N'dahla* Gorge, and *Ewaninga* where information is provided so that visitors can begin an education to significant Arrernte art sites within the landscape, as well as guided tours possible at Rainbow Valley and Oak Valley art sites.



*Fish Hole, Jay Creek  
(Kaperte Urrperle)  
2011*



## Local Groups Within the Arrernte Country of the Alice Water District

The local land-owning groups of people within the area of the Water District include those of the Alice Springs Native Title Claim, namely the “estate” groups called *Irlpme* (northern part about Bond Springs); *Mparntwe* (Alice Springs greater town area and south to about Roe Creek); and *Antulye*, mainly from the vicinity of Undoolya station and proximity to Amoonguna in to the *Irlpme* and *Mparntwe* groups. (There is also a greater area of land included in a different meaning of *Mparntwe*, which was first defined by the old men who assisted Spencer and Gillen to understand land-ownership [Spencer and Gillen, Vol.1, 1927], but it is not considered here). The largest group known in Gillen’s time in central Australia (1875-1901) were the forty individuals of the mainly Caterpillar totem group of the Alice Springs area group (Spencer and Gillen, 1899: 423).

How many “estate” groups once existed in the area of the Water District, and how many are still recognised, I do not know, but on the basis of work that I have done for various Arrernte-based organisations over the decades, old references and the Australia-wide review by Tindale (1974), I would postulate about twenty estate groups, in total numbering about two hundred people, in 1860. Those further south of the main ranges would have required more country than those of the Alice Springs Native Title claim area, which is rich in traditional resources and water supplies.

These estate boundaries have rarely, if ever, to my knowledge, been clearly identified in traditional bounded areas, as T.G.H. Strehlow did for a small portion of Western Arrernte country (Strehlow, 1978: Map 11). The map for the Alice Springs Native Title Claim, for instance, is a series of rectangles with minor variations, in part because of the pre-existing boundaries of legitimately competing interests under the terms of the Native Title Act. Certainly, though, there has been recognition of the rights and responsibilities of groups of custodians to considerable numbers of registered sites by the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority, which means relatively small focal areas. These may range in size from such as a single boulder or just a single tree, to a site such as Emily Gap, and sometimes a rocky complex such as Ewaninga. Most have been mapped and some have been fenced. And certainly the Central Land Council has assisted groups of people to establish homeland areas (for example, the Oliver families near Corroboree Rock and the Williams and related families at Little Well), but while their rights are acknowledged by others, the kinds of estate boundaries that existed have not, as far as I am aware, been attempted to be mapped in fine detail except in Western Arrernte country.

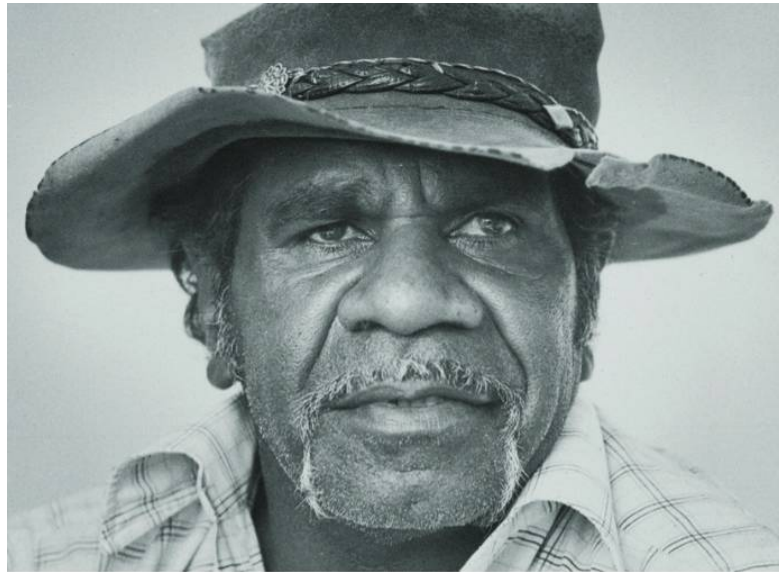
In each “estate” there is always a key totemic site, called *pmara kutata*, perceived as “an everlasting home” with the life forces of the totemic ancestors eternally present, which is also normally a very distinctive feature (not necessarily large), often with a reliable water-source, within each area (Strehlow, 1978). Alice Springs Waterhole, Emily Gap and Simpson’s Gap are some of the best-known of such sites.



*Emily Gap (Anthwerrke) 1950s Photo taken by May Burrows*

The key to all “estate” areas was a reliable as possible water supply, normally requiring a spring, or very good long-lasting soakages and rock-holes, but could involve a known temporary water. However in times of very severe drought, when even normally reliable fall-back waters often failed, people were obliged to seek succour from neighbours with truly reliable waters. After good rains the people of the area of Rainbow Valley, for instance, could use the large claypan waters for possibly two months before having to fall back to their few rock-holes, one of them quite well-protected, and nearby long-lasting soakage, but in a conventional hot, dry time had to move back to the longer-lasting waters of the main ranges. And as Strehlow commented, many Northern Arrernte had to quite regularly retreat to Western Arrernte country because it had far more permanent waters than their own country (Strehlow, 1970: 95-96). Nowadays bores and pumps, often in close proximity to traditional *pmarra kutata* sites, normally provide the water used wherever homeland communities have been established.

## Associations with Place



*Wenten Rubuntja around 1978<sup>4</sup>*

"We been grow up there near *Junction Waterhole* and my little brother Don Rubuntja was born there, and we been grow up there. All around that area - from *Bond Springs* to *Alice Springs* to *Bushy Park* to *Yambah*. Around *Undoolya*, *Snake Well*, all *Todd River*, town and the *old Telegraph Station*.

That's *Atherreywere* that one - *Old Telegraph Station*. Its *Euro Dreaming*.

That was the *Bungalow*, old *Bungalow*. It was a place to live for *Spencer* and *Gillen* before, but then after *World War Two* we had to live there.

On the other sides a place called *Atnyerre-Arrkelthe*. *Alhwarl Atetneme* and *Althirnte-Akerte* this side - that's other side of the gap from the old *Telegraph Station*. Through the gap it's *Athirnte-Akerte* - we call them *floodwater* and the other one creek around there call him *Ngketyenye*. We grew up on the other side and then all go around between that one. Around *Werlatye Atherre* where the big camp used to be.

That camp used to be for old people. Old dead people. We had ceremonies all the time then. We never mess around there. That camp was where that cave with the women. It's a sacred site and there was always been worship on men's side and *kwekatye* side.

Over the other side is *Alhwari Atetneme*. *Alhwari Atetneme* - he's a *Euro* sitting up there. A little rock. A round rock, there on the other side. From *Wigley's Waterhole* down, all them trees they're *kwekatye mob* (young men prior to initiation). Call them *Aperangkerlaneye*. That's all them trees talking to one another. All them young man. All them *kwekatye* men and *Euro* on this side call him *Alhwari Atetneme* - that's another waterhole. Another little waterhole there is *Aperangkerlaneye*, and another around there is *Lyalthe*.

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<sup>4</sup> Photo used on front cover of W. Rubuntja (2002) *The Town Grew Up Dancing*



All those places are special and all through there is *blowfly dreaming*. That's all sacred all the way along. All that's sacred and *kwekatye* start from *Heavitree Gap* place called *Ntaripe* and then he comes to junction where at that *Mpwetyerre* he is *arlperenye*.

*Arlperenye* is the green beetle and that's all the way up to causeway from another side causeway and to Sadadeen point and down to another causeway. That's all the *kwekatye*. All the way along. And that two woman is all the way is *Untyeyatwilye* where the oval is. Where ANZAC oval is that's Corkwood tree - *Untyeyatwilye*.

Those places have all got names. Right through *Middle Park - Lhenpe Artnwe* - right down to --- *Lyalthe* turn off - little corner where that trough hole is where that two woman been laying down.

When I was young man we were just living with ceremony: corroboree dance, women's dancing, women's traditional side and men's traditional side.

There was corroboree dance for men to see and women to see. We'd all come to the creek dance, all to see them.

Other ones you can't see - it's confidential. Some are women's side or men's side. That's only the big ceremony for a worship. But after the worship comes - Righto! Fun for the dance. Go for the hunting. All way long. All the way along *Todd River*. Right up to *Bond Springs*."

So stated the late Wenten Rubuntja, expressing concerns in May 1992 about proposals to build a dam north of Alice Springs, in the Junction Hole area. It is an excellent example of a senior Arrernte man drawing upon the deep past of pre-European times and his own life experiences to inform people in 1992, and a good example of how the recent past can inform the present. Also, while giving his own perceptions, he was making the comments on behalf of all of the traditional Native Title holders of Alice Springs, and through his understandings of the various "Dreaming" trails, linking Alice Springs to a wider range of sites and peoples.

Wenten then continued, indicating that he understood "some whitefellas" such as Spencer and Gillen, and Miss O.M. Pink, whom he respected, had recorded some aspects of these matters of interest, and after also talking about rain-makers and boyhood jobs, he returned to his concerns about the proposed dam.

"We had to stop that dam because it right along the cave, and I showed them," he said, indicating that he had shown a sacred site and sacred objects to lawyers and anthropologists investigating the issue. ("Talking History", May 1992.).

There are relatively few people left who can sing the songs of the country as old Wenten and the men and women of his generation could – Max Stuart is one, and Mervyn Rubuntja learnt a great deal from his father too -, but nonetheless much knowledge remains of the total area under consideration<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> This is particularly so in the case of the records held by the Central Land Council, Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority and Strehlow Research Centre. Although most of these are not publicly

## Links Between Water Sites

The links between sites along the lines of ranges or along watercourses, often well-defined defined walking pads, have been touched upon. However it is not just the place-names, but their appearance and the images, songs and emotions that they evoked that are so very different from anything that the European names offer. If one were to ask for responses to the words “termites”, “bilbies” and “Mount Conway” one might reasonably think that even a knowledgeable person might respond, “Termites cause problems by eating anything wooden, and kids get chocolate bilbies for Easter. Conway was a station manager who assisted the first Overland Telegraph Line people and early explorers. Old Mort Conway was given his name from the name of the mountain by Ida Standley, the first school-teacher in Alice Springs.” However if one asked someone as knowledgeable as Max Stuart about the termites and the Mount, he might well respond by referring to the Arrernte name *Iloata* and sing the songs of association of the two termite sisters who sit on the crest with the winds blowing all about them, the kestrels swooping by and screeching, and the grassy slopes of the mountains falling away, before singing the final six verses and explaining:

“One of the *Iloata* sisters sees the bandicoot tailtips suspended from the pole of the woman ancestor at Urumuna ‘flashing like lightning’. She bursts into tears unable to accept this invitation.

“With bandicoot tips she beckons me to come;  
With furry tailtips she beckons me to come.

On the edge of the precipice she bows low her head;  
The tear drops are chasing each other [down her cheeks].”

Another of the *Iloata* sisters gazes towards *Alkngeutjata* [a steep part of the range near Simpson’s Gap] and exchanges glances with its ancestress. Both of them begin to weep when they realize that they will never meet.

“From *Alkngeutjata* her eyes are staring at me unflinchingly;  
Under half-closed lids she is staring at me unflinchingly.

Her tear drops are chasing each other [down her cheeks];  
Searing her brain, they are chasing each other [down her cheeks].

The tears are chasing each other [down her cheeks],  
Tears upon tears, bitter with grief.”

These tears have been shed by the *Iloata* woman. At their sight the ancestress of *Alkngeutjata*, too, begins to weep.

“From the crest of her mountain she causes me [to weep], -  
A flood of tears she causes me to weep.” (Strehlow, 1971: 673-674).

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accessible, all organisations have information in the form of booklets, maps, annual and other material which allow some understandings. The “Land Rights News” also provides much useful information.

We who are new-comers to this county are privileged to be able to view the land afresh, through Arrernte song-poetry. We can also readily see how water to water are linked, for Mount Conway, Simpsons Gap and Ooraminna are each within one day's long walk, or two easier days. And of course, the distinctive shape and colour of Mount Conway was a guide visible from a long way east and west along the Emu Dreaming trail for people who were travelling to the long-lasting waterholes and springs close-by in the ranges.



*View to the West from Mt Gillen (Alheke Ulyele) 2009*



## **Age of Ancestral Aboriginal Occupation of, and Uses and Interests in, Sites in the Water District**

No-one can date “Dreaming” trails, but untranslatable archaic words in the songs, and ancient rock-carvings which are part of the “Dreaming” evidence, suggest centuries, if not in some instances thousands of years. Mike Smith has carried out the most archaeological research by any archaeologist in central Australia, always with full agreement by and cooperation of the custodians. Within or in close proximity to the Water Districts area he has determined dates of occupation of 980 (+ or – 80) years before the present (B.P.) for the site *Urre* on the Hugh River, 1460 (+ or – 210) B.P. as the oldest of two dates for *Intirtekwerle* (a site south of the Alice near Deep Well), and 590 (+ or- 80) B.P. for *Kweyunpe* (Pine Gap area). In roughly rounded dates the range is 600 to 1500 years B.P. for oldest occupation at the various sites (Smith, 1988: 58a, 79).

As one might expect, these sites were all occupied on a seasonal basis throughout the centuries until the presence of European-Australians caused changes. Illustrative of all sites, as several of the senior men told me, is that the last major traditional uses of the Kuyunpa sites were for initiation, men’s hunting, and women’s hunting and gathering in the late 1940’s-early 1950’s. The combination of the Assimilation policy after World War 11, the drought of 1958-1965, relocation of people from “the Bungalow” at the Alice Springs Telegraph Station to Amoonguna in the early 1960’s, construction of the Joint Defence Research Facility (“Space Base”) 1967-70, and other factors brought about major changes. I was involved with Jack Cooke, then local Director of the Dept of Aboriginal Affairs, in the first formal attempts at protection of sites there in 1972. Thereafter custodians have made irregular visits as part of the formal protection and information policy of their Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority from its establishment in 1974 to the present day.

The older dates are far less than sites in Luritja country considerably southwest and west-southwest of Haasts Bluff, where dates of 30,000 to 35,000 years B.P have been obtained. While it is possible that the vast occupational age differences reflect the reality of a much later occupation of the area in the Water District, it is more probable that they simply reflect that older sites have not yet been located in the country under consideration, or that conditions do not favour the preservation of more ancient sites in the area.



*Carvings at Ewaninga Claypan 2010*

It is extremely rare to be able to obtain dates for rock art, whether painted or engraved. Evidence, such as the presence of red ochre in a dateable deposit in a rock-shelter, does not prove that it was used at the same time as a red-ochred painting on the wall of the same rock-shelter unless the ochre used in the painting can also be dated. This is extremely rare. However undoubtedly the paintings at Emily Gap and the engravings at Ewaninga are centuries old, and possibly over 1,000 years old in the case of the engravings.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> There are no dated rock paintings in central Australia, but the oldest reliably dated engravings in central Australia are at Wanga East, near Watarrka (Kings Canyon) and nearby Puritjarra. They are approximately 4,500 years old (Smith, et.al.2009). I believe, as do others who are truly expert in understandings of rock art and weathering processes, that they are much more ancient – looking than any of the many other rock-engravings in their near vicinity or anywhere else thus far discovered in the Centre. This includes the Ewaninga engravings that thousands of tourists have read about since the signs were first erected (1982 as I recall), and which are totally misleading. These signs were first prepared by Parks and Wildlife sign-writers on behalf of Parks and Wildlife officers who preferred the “Wow factor”, as one of them told me at the time, rather than scientific evidence. I do not have the newspaper cuttings, but from memory the late Bill Morsi, an Egyptian teacher at Alice Springs High school with no training in archaeology, had stated in a “Letter to the Editor” of the “Centralian Advocate” his conviction that they were ancient Egyptian in origin. This would have been somewhere between about 1975-1980. I unfortunately responded by saying that taking logic to a ridiculous conclusion, one might well instead say that ancient Aborigines had taught the Egyptians rather than that each had independently developed their art in isolation from one another. The Parks and Wildlife officers based the notes used on the signs on these two ridiculously unprovable and improbable letters. The moment I saw the brand new sign I contacted the officer then in charge of such planning and advised him both face-to-face and in writing that there was absolutely no proof of the age suggested on the sign. He responded by saying that, since the signs cost a great deal of money, the errors would only be able to be rectified when new replacement signs were made. Despite talking with various other Parks and Wildlife officers since 1982, sensible corrections to the signs have never been made!

## Some Significant Aspects of “Dreaming” Trails and Song-Lines

To give but three personal examples from the area of the Water District, I have been privileged to travel with custodians and kinsman along part of the Rain Dreaming from Korporilya, which sweeps in near Pine Gap, loops south to Ooraminna Rockhole, and continues via proximity to Rainbow Valley to Oak Valley before swinging away to the north-east; followed parts of the Two Carpet Snakes Dreaming from south of Numery station on the Plenty River country westerly to the Anmatyerre country; and followed parts of the Emu Dreaming a long way west into Western Australia. While it is evident that the rain does on occasions generally follow the route indicated, and the two kinds of animals are to be found along their routes, the Arrernte perceive that they also performed their creator deeds which left land-marks and waterholes along key walking routes for the Arrernte of the area in question and well beyond into other people’s countries. The songs that were sung at each named site were celebrations of the creator ancestor’s deeds, but also by importantly being sung in the correct order provided information about the nature of each site, most of which linked water to water for survival. (Strehlow, 1971).

I also count myself privileged to have attended many of the hearings during the Native Title Claim, done much of the travelling to sites at that time, and been present when the late Bessie Liddle sang the songs of the Travelling Women to the judge at the Old Telegraph Station. Although since then I have heard a Pintupi man singing the same story-line, she was probably the last person to know the entire song-line from south of Kata-Tjuta (the Olgas) near the S.A border right through to the proposed dam site.



*Emily Gap Rock Art related to Caterpillar Dreaming 2011*

## **Arrernte Knowledge of Past Great Floods.**

Anyone who has lived anywhere in Australia for forty years or more knows well about droughts and floods. In Arrernte culture there was a generally encoded knowledge about both, in that people knew when and where to retreat to the permanent fall-back waters, and when to go to the high ground in time of floods. Common-sense, life experiences and handed down knowledge all played a part in survival. This was probably similar in all cultures on earth until the rise of modern mega cities, even though the triggers for the knowledge were different.

I have long been interested in the differences between recorded history and mythology, which tells of long-ago events, e.g. Ulysses and Sinbad the Sailor. Some myths may be totally imaginary but are based on characters and conduct of an era – King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table is often regarded in such a way - but others, however wonderfully imaginative elements within them, refer to actual events of the past. These vary from nation to nation, people to people, group to group and to individuals, and without a formal calendar of some kind cannot be accurately dated, although they may often be reasonably postulated. However a great deal is now being incorporated into all people's own often shared stories by television programs, as well as by reading and the radio, films, what is available for show in museums and art galleries, the Web, Facebook, and so-on. To distinguish what is truly handed down in an ancestral sense from what is handed down from a wide range of recorded sources is becoming more and more difficult to distinguish.

One perception of time-depth was readily provided during the course of preparation for the Native Title claim in 1996-1997. There was no adult who could not tell the anthropologists and lawyers some details of family ancestry, or adopted and fostered ancestry, going back to their grandparent's times or about a century, but it required much sleuthing by the anthropologists (John Morton in particular) in the Spencer and Gillen, Strehlow and other records to make the genealogies as complete and far back in the past as possible. And as historian for the claim I had to counter the NT Government's opposition history by convincing the judge to accept that "continuous connection" did go back to about 1820. What of real memory of ancestrally handed on accounts of floods?

Arrernte people and all other people alike who live by inland river systems learn that old flood debris gives a good idea of recent floods, and that box gums (coolibahs) mark the highest flood-levels of the past. The first surveyors to come to the Centre were all aware of this, which is why (independent of Arrernte or other people's views, though they did their best to be friendly to them) the Overland Telegraph Line construction teams built telegraph stations at Charlotte Waters, Alice Springs and Barrow Creek on high ground well above waterholes.

The first surveyor on record who consulted with Aborigines was G. Stewart, in 1888, while in charge of the surveying of the intended "Transcontinental Railway". He found that Arrernte people remembered two big floods north of Oodnadatta prior to his survey work, one in 1878 (which was as white men of the telegraph line also remembered) and one apparently well before 1870. At Heavitree Gap he found that there was a "well-defined drift mark" which was "only remembered" as evidence of a flood "by the old natives" (Stewart, 1890: 2,11). As "old" here almost certainly



means people in their mid-60's, (and five to eight years old is a good age for the beginning of clear memories), one can reasonably postulate that this exceptional flood occurred in about 1830



*Todd River in flood near the Telegraph Station 1988© NT Government*

The late Walter Smith (born in either 1893 or 1898) was the only person with whom I talked among the old-timers born between about 1880-1910 who had a memory of this as a handed-down story, although Mort Conway remembered another probable linked event (also known to Walter) from further east. Neither man could give any approximate time for the great flood, but reasonably guessed it to have probably been in their grandparents' time. It was in 1981 that Walter indicated that it had been much higher than the 1974 flood, and I drove to Heavitree Gap with him where he pointed out about where he thought it had reached. I later climbed up the Gap on the east side and determined, from where dead trees grew and from a line of debris in crevices, that it would have been a flood high enough to have covered all of Alice Springs except for the crest of Billy-goat Hill and other similar high points on the edge of town.

Later scientists in town, Geoff Pickup (an expert on slack-water deposits, formed during periods of high floods) and American Mary Bourke, a geomorphologist who was doing her PhD. on floods in deserts, found evidence hundreds of years old and, in some cases, tens of thousands of years old, that indicated that there had been rare floods of much greater size. Remnant evidence from these super-floods of ancient times, ranging from about 400 years ago to tens of thousands of years ago in the Pleistocene period, was normally viewed as part of the natural form of the country by the Arrernte with whom I travelled as well as by myself. However one ancient distinctive deposit of sand which is remnant from these super floods has been incorporated into the Emu Dreaming.

I told Mary Bourke of the evidence at Heavitree Gap and she climbed up and confirmed the flood that only Old Walter had remembered being told about. However as a result of her public talks there are now many more Arrernte and other people who know of it.

On the basis of Walter being the only person who recalled being told of it, and of him living into his 90's, this suggests that actual handed on stories of dramatic events in Arrernte history can persist for about 150 years<sup>7</sup>. These kinds of dates are as one might expect, given that there are still strong bans placed on speaking people's names after their death, and given that it is fairly clear that certain much more ancient events experienced by human ancestors are incorporated into the "Dreaming" stories, songs and trails as deeds performed by totemic animals or plants.



*Heavitree Gap 1988 Floods © NT Government*

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<sup>7</sup> I have a few other local accounts of events that occurred about 1830-1860, and an oral history I recorded from the River Murray in 1961 which gives about 180 years for the longest-handed down account of a dramatic flood there. This account suggested that the flood was much higher than it actually was, but nonetheless the oldest coolibah evidence at Overland Corner and elsewhere indicates that it was a few centimetres higher than the 1956 flood, which is the highest on record since Europeans arrived.

## **European History of the Alice Springs Water District.**

### **John McDouall Stuart, 1860.**

From the commencement of European interest in, and settlement of, Australia, there had been interest in what lay beyond the coastal ports and frontiers. Many had supposed that there must be rivers that flowed to an inland sea, and the settlement of Adelaide in South Australia in 1836 gave impetus to the challenge. However after the reports of Captain Charles Sturt's explorations of 1844-46 from the Murray and Darling Rivers to the eastern edge of what was later named the Simpson Desert, some began to think that the entire inland must be one huge desert. John McDouall Stuart, who had been with Captain Sturt as draftsman and, after the death of the nominated second-in-command also took over this role, was to prove this idea incorrect.

John McDouall Stuart and his first party of two men were armed with rifles and revolvers, both for the procurement of game-food and, in emergency only, self-defence against Aboriginal attacks. This was the same formal rule given in his later expeditions and by the other explorers and telegraph line parties who followed in the 1870's. It made common sense to try to be friendly, and to avoid conflict.

After coming upon and naming the Finke River on 4<sup>th</sup> April 1860, not far from the present Aboriginal community of Apatula (Finke), John McDouall Stuart and his party of two men followed the general route of the Finke north. It is clear from his account of waterholes with water still running in the river-beds that there had recently been good rains. Two days later Stuart saw the first Arrernte man, who fled on sighting the horses; "numerous tracks" of other people; and visited and named Chambers Pillar. Then on the 8th April he named the Hugh River. As this major tributary river offered a route more directly north than the Finke, he followed it, naming the James Range, seeing a "number" of old Aboriginal camps then a "large number of Native encampments", apparently of recent occupation. (Stuart [Ed. J.B.], 1983: 23-27). However, because he crossed over the James Range he did not locate the majority of potential waters along the route of the Hugh River within the Range until his return.

Throughout his journey Stuart also commented on the nature of the vegetation, animal life and water supplies. Thus his journal gives the first significant British account of waters in the area under consideration. Illustrative is his verbatim account on 11<sup>th</sup> April of the Hugh River country north of what he called the Crawford Range, a name which was almost immediately altered to the Waterhouse Range, the name which prevails today.

"[At] 15 miles again crossed the Hugh coming from the east splendid gum trees in it of every size the pine is also here the first we have met with, a splendid hole of water here large and deep with rushes growing round it, I think it is a spring the water seems to come from below a large bed of conglomerate quartz, I should say it is permanent, a great number of black cockatoos and other birds, number of Native tracks all about." (Ibid: 28).

To the close north was the MacDonnell Range, which he named along with Brinkley's and Hanson's Bluffs on the 12th April. After Stuart had climbed Brinkley's Bluff to find a way through the ranges, he and his party crossed over to the north side of the MacDonnells via the rocky pass now known as Stuart's Pass. His account of the rocky pass clearly meant that it was not useable by later travellers with wagon loads of equipment, including pastoralists and Overland Telegraph parties who he clearly envisaged as following his route.

After naming all major waters along his route as far north as Attack Creek, (north of Tennant Creek), he returned via the same most direct route. After using his pass through the MacDonnells to reach the Hugh River, his comments on the 26<sup>th</sup> July when he was approaching the northern-most section of the area under consideration, are interesting.

“[Still] plenty of water in the Hugh although greatly reduced, the Natives have been following our tracks (the former ones) in great numbers ---”. (Ibid: 82).

He found that, with the exception of the springs, without further rain all river and creek flow had ceased, evaporation had caused some waters to disappear, and he had to search the Hugh River and tributary creek junction areas for water.

On the 28<sup>th</sup> July he stopped at the same spring as had impressed him on the way north on the 11th April and found another nearby. On the 30th he used a soakage near Owen Springs (named on his second journey). Between the 31<sup>st</sup> July and 1<sup>st</sup> August, although finding a large waterhole used on his northward travel dry, he made use of seven waterholes in the James Range. Then as he travelled back towards the Finke River on the 2<sup>nd</sup> August he located a “Native well about 4 feet deep in a side creek” (probably Orange Creek), which allowed an overnight camp. (Ibid: 82-84) Although recognising that soakage waters existed beneath the sand, as the shovel had been lost and his two companions and himself were too weak from a starvation diet and scurvy to dig for water, he returned to a waterhole on the Finke not far from Chambers Pillar, and from there back into the station country that he had previously surveyed in South Australia.

Stuart's comments about the different kinds of waters; the evaporation rate throughout his return journey; the sandy nature of much of the country as well as the sandy beds of major creeks and rivers meaning soakage water is significant; the lack of rain after April resulting in large claypans drying out in under 5 months (Ibid: 25-87) were all not only the first by a British explorer, but also very correct kinds of records about the water supplies in a conventional good rainfall year throughout central Australia. In particular they gave the first idea of what the waters were like in the Alice Springs Water District. However additionally they give the first accounts of observations about the Arrernte people of the region. Clearly they were initially afraid of these strange “monsters” who were traversing their country, but also later fascinated by their tracks.

He was to find that the waters remained similar in their fluctuations on his further four traverses of the same country in 1861-62, but also that the Arrernte became less fearful. As a consequence of his reports, the South Australian Government claimed the area known as the Northern Territory (of South Australia) in



1862 and remained in administrative charge to 1911, when the Federal Government took control.

All other explorers of the Alice Springs Water District found the water supplies similar throughout to those discovered by Stuart, and a selection of their records are now briefly considered.



*Billy Hayes, Jim Thomas, Stephen Turner and Harry Osborn re-enacting Stuarts 1860 expedition during National Trust's Heritage Week April 2010, held at Simpsons Gap  
Photo taken by Laurelle Halford.*

## John Ross, 1870-71

John Ross and his party of three sent ahead of the Overland Telegraph construction crews from well south of present-day Oodnadatta to find an easy access route through the MacDonnell Ranges, clearly arrived in central Australia at the end of an exceptional wet season. Using Stuart's maps and after following the Macumba River in northern South Australia, he thought that he was on the Finke when in fact he was on the rarely flowing creeks and flood-flats well east of the main river-bed. In following these flood-flats into sandhill country he was therefore the first, and one of the very few people ever, to use horses to relatively easily cross south-north through the western portion of what later became known as the Simpson Desert.

On the 11<sup>th</sup> September, 1870 having previously observed an Aboriginal man who they thought must be making for water, they located a waterhole close to the end of what they mistakenly thought was the Hugh River, then the Finke, before – in following it and realising its trend - they decided it must be another river altogether. Ross was later to name it the Todd but, being anxious to locate Chambers Pillar as a guide to their whereabouts, on the 21<sup>st</sup> Sep. the party turned south-west from about half-way along the Todd, and initially their travel was almost certainly all east of the Water District.

Although unable to converse with the Aborigines he found at the waterhole, Ross, already an experienced explorer in arid country, recognised that by their gestures indicating that they wanted Ross, his men and the horses to leave, and by the focus of birds, that “[water] must be a very scarce commodity in this direction.” A relatively short distance further north-west he commented on the numerous tracks, fires and smokes of Eastern Arrernte people. However after they turned south-west into the sandhill country and, after ten days with little water except at Phillipson's Creek, were still a day east of Chambers Pillar, he commented that, there being no tracks visible and only occasional evidence of year- old fires, that “[natives] very seldom inhabit this country.”

On the 3rd October they arrived at and carved their names on Chambers Pillar, then initially found the water of the Finke very salty, but soon found a fresh supply where they camped for the night. The next day they arrived at the Hugh River junction, and inspected it for a short distance. Ross commented favourably on it as an easier access route than the Finke, with plentiful good red-gum timber for telegraph poles.

From here they returned to the advance groups of the Overland Telegraph survey and construction parties where Ross honoured the key organiser, Charles Todd, by naming the newly discovered River after him, handed over the plans made, replenished their supplies and started north again. As Ross had not followed the Todd into the area of the Water District, he had still not found a suitable access route for wagon teams through the main ranges.

On December 4<sup>th</sup> they reached the Hugh, again after good rains, and after catching fish in a large waterhole and observing them in others, Ross commented two

days later “the large waterholes are permanent water fresh and deep.” Given the two remarkable seasons he had experienced, it was an understandable error of perception.

They then travelled to the junction of the Alice Creek with the Hugh, where they camped near a small waterhole, and Ross shortly afterwards commented on the high evaporation rate of two other large waterholes further north in the Hugh. He must have been very close to the southern boundary of the Water District, but then rather unaccountably turned north-east again. Their route took them east of the Water District via Phillipson’s Creek to the Todd and Hale River tributary creeks of what is now known as the Arltunga country, Harts Range and the Waite River, then west and south to Central Mount Stuart before a return similar to Stuart’s, but about 8 kilometres east of Stuart’s Pass. This route was, as Ross noted on the 18<sup>th</sup> January 1871 so “fearfully rough for the horses” that any attempt to use it by the Overland Telegraph parties “would result in failure.”

As he later recognised, he found himself on a tributary creek of the Hugh as he passed through and emerged from the MacDonnell Ranges. He was on the extreme north-east of the Water District when he recorded:

“A few [potential telegraph] poles in the creek but not plentiful abundance of water in several pools in the creek. Saw some natives a few yards ahead of us run out of sight setting fire to the grass as they went and on our course. The creek is now a good sized gum creek ---.” (Ibid).

The next day found them on the Hugh River at the northern entrance to Lawrence Gorge, with water seemingly “plentiful”, even though the season was now dry; “poles in any number”; and native fires had burnt much of the grass.

On the 19th January, still on the Hugh, he recorded that, “Natives are more numerous in this country than in any other we have seen yet, their tracks are in every direction and in some places native paths but they keep out of our sight ---.”

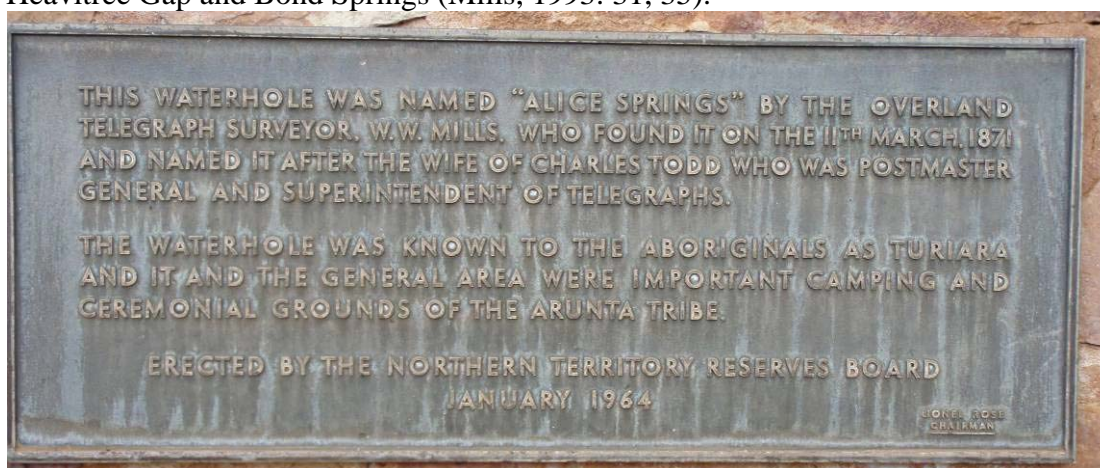
He reiterated this perception a day later, indicating that although they had only found one large waterhole on which they camped, the Aborigines must have had other nearby waters available to them. This waterhole, he remarked on the 22<sup>nd</sup> January, was “100 yards in length and teeming with fish.” (Ibid).

It is difficult to know precisely where this waterhole is located, but it may well have been in the vicinity of Long Waterhole, which is on the Hugh south-east of Rainbow Valley, and immediately south of the Water District.

Ross then returned with his small exploratory party to the main Overland Telegraph Line working groups, having failed in his primary task, which was to find a suitable pass for the telegraph parties’ horse-drawn wagons and crews. Although he had discovered much more country, including major pastoral potential land and some he thought was possibly gold-bearing, and named several significant features in the Eastern MacDonnell Ranges and further north, he had not added anything substantial to that which Stuart had recorded a decade earlier in the area under consideration.

## The Overland Telegraph Survey and Construction Teams, 1871-1872

G.R. McMinn with five men and W.W. Mills with two left the main party at Alice Well on the 9<sup>th</sup> February, 1871 and travelled north, Mc Minn discovering Orange Creek on the 15<sup>th</sup>, then Temple Bar Creek on the 17<sup>th</sup> and Simson's Gap (later corrected to Simpson's) on the 18<sup>th</sup>. (Symes, 1960: 44; Taylor, 1980: 71-73). Meanwhile Mills, having followed the Hugh north, then followed the dip of the country east had connected the two lines of exploration, but both had been delayed by heavy rains. After both had returned to the Alice Well and McMinn had suggested that Mills try for a likely pass to the north of Temple Bar gap, Mills again set out for Temple Bar and was soon following the Todd north (Symes, 1960: 44-45). On the 11<sup>th</sup> March he found a series of waterholes and springs, "the principal of which is the Alice Spring which I had the honour of naming after Mrs Todd." He also named Heavitree Gap and Bond Springs (Mills, 1993: 31, 35).



*Plaque at the Telegraph Station Waterhole 2011*

In next-to-no time the Overland Telegraph Station was being constructed at Alice Springs, and survey work had resulted in the discovery of Doctors Stones, Fenn Gap, McClure's Springs, Emily Springs (now known as Emily Gap) and many other sites close to the west, south-west, east and north of Alice Springs (Lewis, 1922: 77-80). One of the best-known of the Arrernte of the northern part of the Water District who assisted the telegraph construction crews was called "Line Party Bob" as a result of his associations, while Walter Smith also told me of another known as "Wagon Jack."

Formal survey work by Charles Winnecke from November 1877-July 1878, during which time he was assisted by an Aboriginal man whom Walter Smith well-recalled as "Winnecke Mick", resulted in a number of additional place-names, including the Ooraminna Range and Mount Gillen; the surveying of the entire Western MacDonnell Range section from Alice Springs north to a depot at Painta (now Painter) Springs then west and south-west to Hamilton Creek, Jay Creek, Owen Spring and the James Range; and the surveying of the entire Eastern MacDonnells section from Alice Springs north to Painta Springs depot and Mount Charles (northern-most part of the Alice Springs water district), east to Undoolya station and beyond to Benstead Creek and Love's Creek, and south to Mount Burrell, (Winnecke, 1882: 1-3).





Although the initial Overland Telegraph Line came via the Owen Springs country and looped in from Fenn Gap north-east to Heavitree Gap and then Alice Springs and beyond, there were rapid further discoveries by surveyors, stockmen, mounted police during patrols, and other travellers of creek-beds, rockholes (including Ooraminna), claypans and other sizeable waters after rains immediately south and north of the Alice (e.g. see Stewart, 1890: 3-4 ; Willshire, 1888: 9). These discoveries resulted in a more direct teamsters' route from Horseshoe Bend and Idracowra Stations on the Finke to the Ooraminna Range, then three new branching routes from Ooraminna Rockhole and Range to the Alice Springs Telegraph Station via Heavitree Gap, Emily Gap and Undoolya station (Spencer and Gillen, Vol. 1, 1912: 183-184). Shortly thereafter a more direct section of telegraph line was built due south to link with the original line, although the original route was still followed by teamsters who needed to deliver stores and equipment to Owen Springs, and mounted police patrols, geologists and those pastoralists and station-hands working on newly developed pastoral properties to the south-west. A Stock-route line of wells from northern South Australia and the southern Territory via Deep Well to the Alice and north was also constructed in the mid-late 1880's to allow stock to be walked south to markets. When the town of Oodnadatta in northern S.A. came into being as the rail-head in 1890-91, the line of wells north assisted cameleers to take the loading to and from the Centre, and also assisted the pastoralists of central Australia to move stock into or out of the Territory (Yelland, 2002: 69-74).

Interestingly, with their zeal for exploration, and by using the same river systems, high points of the landscape and presence of certain birds as common-sense indicators of being in the vicinity of waters as no doubt had the original Aboriginal explorers, the new pioneer explorers and settlers as they saw themselves to be, and invaders as the Arrernte perceived them, had discovered all major ground-waters and most minor ones in just 40 years. They had had the advantage of both horses and camels to carry them and their equipment; the presence of Arrernte as indicated by walking pads and the smokes of their fires as well as occasional sightings; and shortly after initial contact the assistance of Arrernte, in locating the waters. Although they had much still to learn, and such learning is constantly being refined, they had made an impressive start to their knowledge about the waters of the Alice Springs Water District.

## Overlanders and the Pastoral Industry, 1872 – 1893

John Lewis, who left Adelaide in January 1872 to overland 600 bullocks to the Cox Peninsular near Darwin, gives a good illustrative account of the route and experiences within the Water District.

In mid-April Lewis's party arrived at Alice Well, but finding it dry (although the season was excellent) travelled along the Hugh until they "found a little soakage in the bed of the river." Thereafter they found two small waterholes, then a "nice waterhole" at Rocky Camp; "plenty of water and fine fish" at another waterhole; on the 22<sup>nd</sup> April camped at "a splendid little waterhole" called "Doctor's Hole or Minnie Creek" in the James Range; beyond the junction of "Cregan's Creek" with the Hugh found another "splendid waterhole" where they met two men returning with OT Line horses; passed a flock of sheep being walked up the O.T. Line by two men; travelled to Doctor's Stones and then McClure's Springs, "meeting two bullock teams coming from the Alice"; then travelled via Fenn's Gap to Alice Springs, arriving on the 28th April, 1872.

During the course of this section of his journey Lewis had seen a "few natives, but they did not come near us" ; and in addition to commenting on the flora and fauna, also stated that "[all] along the Hugh and at McClure's Springs I planted numbers of pie-melon and water-melon seeds."

The earliest suggestion of tourism in the Centre is also indicated when he mentions that, on 1<sup>st</sup> May, he visited Emily Springs, "about five miles to the south-east, where there is a remarkable gorge in which the natives have painted the walls on both sides." There is also an early account of relaxing out bush when he and four friends travel out through Heavitree Gap to a waterhole in a small creek "twelve miles south-east of the Alice" then, after camping overnight with a "bonny fire", return via Jessie's Spring (now Jessie Gap) to the Telegraph Station.



*Jessie Gap  
(Akepelye)  
1984*

Their route beyond the Alice was not along the telegraph line but to the north-west, apparently via the main creek-lines that later became part of the old stock-route from Hamilton Downs. (Lewis, 1922:77-80).

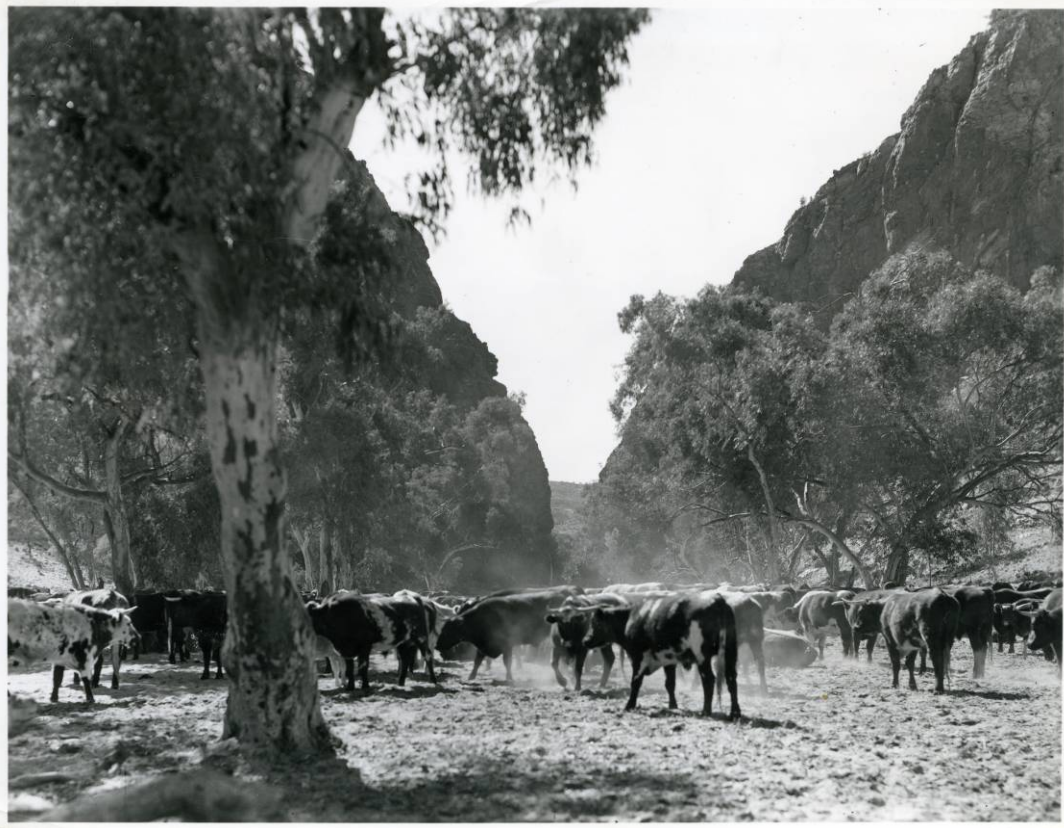
The Alice Springs Telegraph Station always had horse-teams and various other working stock, as well as a flock of sheep for meat-food, so included along with its primary telegraphic role that of a stock-holder. The early flocks of sheep were in their hundreds, but that it was a larger stock-holder than might generally be thought is indicated by Ebenezer Flint's evidence to the 1887 Transcontinental Railway Commission, when he stated "[about] 4,000 ration sheep are kept by the telegraph department near Alice Springs."

The first cattle stations in central Australia were taken up in 1872. These were Owen Springs and Undoolya which were stocked in 1872-1874, initially with a combined total of 3,200 "great cattle" on the two stations. A short but intense drought in 1875 resulted in mobs of cattle, sheep (for Hermannsburg Mission) and horses being held at Dalhousie Springs until it broke in 1876, whereupon another 3,700 head of stock were walked to the runs. Of later relevance to the Water District, indirectly because of stock movements into the Water District on occasions, Glen Helen station was stocked with cattle in 1878-1879 and Mount Burrell in 1885. The latter switched emphasis to horse-breeding almost immediately, when 800 head of horses were added to the initial 1,000 head of cattle and 70 horses. Of immediate relevance Bond Springs station was taken up in 1885, and at the time included the present-day Hamilton Downs, Milton Park and Amburla station country (Duncan, 1967: 3, 34). It was stocked with about 4,000 head of cattle and 100 horses from Owen Springs. And William Hayes and family, who had arrived in the Centre in 1884, had taken up "Deep Well Allamba Valley Station" in 1892-1893, starting with a small mob of cattle and goats (Hartwig, Part 11, 1965, 330, 386). At the time, without fences beyond the homestead yards, and with track-riding by stockmen to keep the cattle manageable, the four cattle stations Owen Springs, Undoolya, Bond Springs and Deep Well effectively covered the entire Water District.

In that the stock relied in the main on natural surface waters, scooped out soakage waters and shallow whip-wells in the early decades, the impact on these mainly fall-back survival waters for the Arrernte and all plants and animals that also depended upon them was invariably major, if not catastrophic. This was particularly so in times of drought, such as occurred in 1884-1885, when stock of any kind could not be walked to distant markets. In an attempt to save them a number would be taken to a previously known but unused permanent water, as occurred when hundreds of cows were walked from newly established Anna's Reservoir, near present-day Aileron, to Simpson's Gap in 1884 (Williams, in Purvis, 1971: 69). However this did not change the impact so much as spread it. The country was eaten out for about 15 kilometres around any major water, but also the water was fouled by cattle defecating and urinating while hundreds of cattle also died in and about the long-lasting or truly permanent waters. Not only did this mean that some of the key fall-back waters of the local Arrernte people were rendered unusable, but also their key fall-back reserves of plant-foods were being destroyed a result of cattle grazing and browsing, and



furthermore that some of their meat-food animals were under pressure as their habitats were trampled.



*Cattle at Simpsons Gap ( Urengetyerrpe) 1960s* © Aust. Publicity Council Collection, NT Library

That rapid re-stocking occurred as possible after rains is certain as is indicated by Ebenezer Flint's evidence to the Transcontinental Railway Commission of 1887, when he stated that 6,000 head were on Undoolya (1887:1), which had increased to 7,000 head in 1888 (Willshire, 1888:7). Owen Springs, similarly stocked with thousands of cattle before the drought, had sold its handful of surviving cattle and begun to replace them with horses, so at the time of the Transcontinental Railway hearings only 160-220 horses were on the station (1887:1). However much the pastoral properties in the Centre suffered severely during the drought of 1890-91, which coincided with a depression in South Australia, they were again re-stocked as soon as the drought broke. Only the idea of a railway extension from Oodnadatta to the Alice became a mirage for another 38 years.

## **“Rubies” and Gold 1886-1889**

Henry Vere Barclay and Winnecke had found garnets in the Hale River country, 110 km east of Alice Springs, in 1878, but when explorer-surveyor David Lindsay reported some of them as rubies after his explorations of 1886, a “ruby” rush started in 1887-1888 (Kimber, 1996: 180). The impact on the area of the Alice Springs Water District was considerable, for not only was there stock pressure on the waters and grazing country about Ooraminna Rockhole and Alice Springs, but also there was a wagon road constructed from Ooraminna Rockhole north-east via a large waterhole roughly halfway to Bitter Springs Gorge. Stuart Oliver, a traditional custodian for the Alice Springs and Corroboree Rock area, told me to stop when we were doing some travelling south-east of Alice Springs in the late 1980’s, and pointed out the route of the old wagon road, which was also a camel-string pad and riding horse pad, and the waterhole. Furthermore, there was another route developed via Bond Springs east-north-east across the north-eastern-most part of the Alice Springs Water District to the “ruby” fields, which similarly increased the cartage stock and riding animal pressures on the natural long-lived waters. More significantly, the demands on the Alice Springs Telegraph Station resulted in the township of Stuart (later renamed Alice Springs) being laid out by Lindsay in 1888, with the first few buildings commencing in 1889.

By this time the “rubies” had all been found to be garnets but gold had also been found in the same general area in 1887, with the Arltunga gold-rush commencing in Paddy’s Rockhole Creek. All of the prospectors’ pressures, whether they were “ruby pickers” who remained hopeful until the early 1890’s, or gold prospectors who travelled widely throughout the country east of Alice Springs, and most particularly their stock pressures, greatly waxed and waned depending on drought years and new discoveries of gold, which occurred at Winnecke and White Range fields over the next 16 years. Baldwin Spencer, normally a very reliable scientific recorder, accepted an estimate “that, at one time, there were no fewer than between three and four thousand men on the field” (Spencer and Gillen, Vol.1, 1912: 190), but this must have been the total estimated number of mining men and very occasionally their wives in the period 1887-1912, most of whom spent but a few months at the different rushes, together with the Eastern Arrernte families who assisted them (Donovan 1988: 78-82). However the fields never produced large enough quantities of gold to encourage more than the most experienced and enduring prospectors and hopeful mining syndicates, and between 1908 and 1916 the gold-fields effectively died, along with most of the old-time miners (Donovan, 1988: 70-84, Gee, 1926: 40-43; Kimber 1996:1-7, 179-183). The key point, though, with regard to the Alice Springs Water District was the pressure upon all waters along the different routes. In particular, as Spencer indicated, initially all prospecting parties, miners and suppliers of stores and equipment, “had, of necessity, travelled along the track of the telegraph line.” (Spencer and Gillen, Vol.1, 1912: 190).

## Impact of European Explorers and Others on Arrernte People of the Alice Springs Water District 1861-1911

John McDouall Stuart and his party, consisting of ten men and forty eight horses, reached the southern part of the Water District on Stuart's second journey to the Centre on 6<sup>th</sup> March 1861. As his old horse-tracks were still visible he knew that no rain had fallen in the previous five months. Stuart indicates that "a few rushes" and "the sight and sound of numerous diamond birds [Zebra Finches], a sure sign of the proximity of water", alerted them to the presence of a Hugh River waterhole near the southern James Range. They came upon a man and woman fishing by using a "brush fence", with their child upon the bank. The woman fled, taking her child with her and climbing a nearby tree. "The man ---, although startled at our appearance, took it leisurely in getting out of the water, ascended the bank, and had a look at us; he then addressed us in his own language, and seemed to work himself up into a great passion, stopping every now and then and spitting fiercely at us like an old tiger." He then climbed the tree for safety, shouted and spat at them again, " was very much surprised to see Thring dismount and lead the packhorse down to water", remained silent and observant while the rest of the horses were watered, and commenced shouting and spitting again as they left. (Hardman, 1975 [1865]: 253-254).

I talked with old Walter Smith about this in 1980, and he listened as I read out the passage and chuckled. These first Arrernte to see white men and horses had believed that they were seeing *arrentye* "devil-monsters" he explained, and had initially thought that the men and horses were one animal. Stuart had commented upon his return from his first expedition that local people had been following his horses' tracks, and Arrernte who only came upon the horse tracks and men's boot-tracks came to similar conclusions to those who had seen the horses and men .

"We were terrified by these foot-prints. The boot-tracks looked as though they were made by human-beings; but what kind of creatures could men be who had broad, flat, toeless feet ---. As for the horse tracks, we could tell that they must have been made by huge four-legged creatures, larger than any we had seen before. These creatures, too, had no toes; and their heavy feet had cut their way into even hard clay ground, and left their scars on the rock plates. Surely, we thought, both these kinds of creatures must be evil man-eating monsters!" (Strehlow, 1967: 8)

Nine miles further on the exploration party came to native wells with soakage water, from which Arrernte people had fled, unseen by Stuart. Travelling on up Lawrence Gorge he named Owen Springs on 16<sup>th</sup> March, then commented on the permanency of the upper Hugh waterholes before using the pass beneath Brinkley's Bluff to continue north beyond the Water District. Heavy rain fell at this time. (Ibid: 258-261).

After being forced back to Adelaide, Stuart, with nine men and scores of horses, returned on his final successful expedition to reach the coast of northern Australia. He again entered the Hugh River country, where he was obliged to leave

behind two ill horses, and “about half-way through the gorge” on 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1862 recorded:

“[Some natives] set fire to the grass and dry wood across the creek, which caused a dense smoke to blow in our faces. I had the party prepared for an attack. After passing through the smoke and fire, three natives made their appearance about twenty-five yards off, on the hill side, armed with shields and spears, and biding us defiance by placing the spears in the woomeras, and yelling out at the highest pitch of their voices. I ordered Auld to dismount and fire a shot a little distance to one side of them, to let them know what distance our weapons carried. The ball struck the rock pointed out to him to aim at, and stopped their yelling, but seemed to have no other effect. I again ordered him to fire at the rock on which the middle one of the three was standing; the shot was a good one, for the ball struck the desired spot, and immediately had the effect of sending them off at full speed.” (Hardman, op.cit.: 328-329).

From first contact flight in fear to making a courageous stand was but a very short time, and when Stuart returned through the Hugh River country of the Water District he was to record on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1862 that the Arrernte had entirely overcome their fear of the huge “devil-monsters”.

“Saw where one of the horses died that I was compelled to leave behind on coming up. As there is only the hair of his mane and tail to be seen, and not a single bone, I am inclined to think that he has been killed, carried off, and eaten by the natives. I expect the other one has shared the same fate.” (Hardman, op. cit.: 468).

Stuart’s records of this rapid change in Arrernte comprehensions from instant flight to intelligent observation while fearfully taking a stand, then to courageous defiance and finally the attacking, killing and eating of a “devil monster”, was common. As has earlier been indicated, explorer John Ross also observed similar reactions, with men overcoming initial fear to burn the grass that they had perceived horses required. However there was also one other element – the cautiously friendly approach.

It was almost certainly during the time of construction of the Overland Telegraph line in 1871-72 that the following account was recalled by “Errumphana [Ampetyane], also called King Charlie” who told it to his daughter Amelia Kunoth. The names of the white men involved are not known.

“He was among a group of warriors who saw the first white men to come to this area.

The warriors were at Honeymoon Gap, and saw the white men from a cliff-top.

They were unsure whether the strangers and their horses had blood or not, or if they had come out of the ghost gums.” (I remember another comment by Amelia, that the men watched carefully and, seeing the horses swishing their tails to keep away flies, thought that they were signalling them to come down).



But even with the uncertainty, Errumphana approached the strangers in friendship and provided them with water.

Amelia saw this as an example that colour should never cause barriers.”  
(Brands, 1985)



*Honey Moon Gap 2010 © NT Government*

This rapid adjustment by the Arrernte to the presence of strangers who rode “man-eating monsters” and did not obey any of their laws, trespassing without signalling an approach by a signal smoke, led explorer Barclay to describe the Arrernte as he first knew them in the period 1877-80’s as “ a bold, active, intelligent people, who may well be termed the Highlanders of Australia” who “must have had happy hunting grounds indeed, until disturbed by the ever fatal advance of the white man” (Barclay, 1905: 445).

Although “not more than twenty or thirty” white men lived for long periods of time in the entire MacDonnell Ranges country in the period 1871-1911 (Spencer and Gillen, Vol.1, 1911:190), with the majority living in the Alice Springs Water District, many more were temporarily in the country. Because he was specifically referring to the MacDonnell Ranges, Spencer did not include the Hermannsburg missionaries and other staff, for they had their mission in the Krichauff Range; and he was well aware that hundreds had worked on construction of or otherwise associated with the Overland Telegraph Line and the Alice Springs Telegraph Station, and that thousands of prospectors and miners came during the “ruby” and gold rushes.

The explorer Barclay considered that there were three waves of intrusion that caused conflict, degradation and large-scale demise between 1871-1905. These were the construction workers on the Overland Telegraph Line, the prospectors of the “ruby” rush, and the miners of the Arltunga and other nearby gold-rushes (Barclay, op. cit.: 447-448). Spencer implicitly agrees, commenting only on the second Arltunga “break-out” rush of 1902 that the “influx ---of so many gold miners ---

resulted, as it always does, in far reaching changes among the natives” (Spencer and Gillen, Vol 1, 1911: 190). Barclay clearly meant that the sexual exploitation of Arrernte women and the spread of venereal diseases were the major causes of conflict and demise, but there were also other diseases such as influenza that had a greater impact on Aborigines than European. Typhoid and other diseases also had a major impact. I have postulated that, tragically, some twenty% of Aborigines died of introduced diseases throughout central Australia 1860-1895 (Kimber 1997: 46), but what of conflict?

Spencer made the following general observation:

“When the white man --- occupied the country, stocking it with cattle, he very naturally shot the emu and kangaroo, upon which the natives fed. Naturally also the savage thought that, as the white man killed the kangaroo, he was lawfully entitled to kill the bullock. It was only a case of tit for tat, but, unfortunately, the white man had a rifle and the blackfellow only a spear and boomerang ---.”

“There is no doubt but that the blackfellow, when he had the chance of doing so, committed what the white man, from his point of view, regarded as an outrage; but at the same time the outrages committed by the blacks were as nothing in comparison to those committed by the white men.” (Spencer and Gillen, Vol.1, 1911: 188-189).

The above comments clearly indicate that, in considering the Alice Springs Water District, it was the European focus on key waters, such as the Alice Springs and Heavitree Gap soakages, Emily Gap and Simpson’s Gap waterholes, Ooraminna Rockhole and Owen Springs, and the impact of stock on the near country as well as the shooting of their major game, that caused the Aborigines to retaliate. Although Spencer considered that, with rare exceptions, the white men in central Australia did not commit outrages, the rare exceptions were the problem.

The first attempt to drive white people from the Alice Springs Telegraph Station Waterhole was made when the senior man of the Dingo Dreaming rubbed the sacred “Dog Rock” site on present-day Telegraph Terrace. By also singing the correct songs he had believed that all of the dingoes would become angry, bite the invaders and drive them out of central Australia (Spencer and Gillen, Vol.1, 1927: 92). It had not worked, so that the great sacred Caterpillar sites of Heavitree and Emily Gaps, and the great gathering place for gift-exchanges, Alice Springs, remained occupied by white men and their stock which drank and fouled the important drought fall-back waters. And instead of being driven from the Arrernte country the permanent presence of white people seemed very much intended.

More successful was the next attempt when *Imbarkwa*, “a great man and head of the rain totem” in the Barrow Creek area, performed his special magic which nullified the powers of the southern rain-makers. This “prevented the rain from falling so that the white fellows might be driven out of the country for want of water.” (Gillen, 1968: 128-129). The cattle, horses and sheep began to die in this intense 1884 drought, which extended from northern South Australia through to Newcastle Waters.

At precisely this time two thousand head of cattle, having been overlanded from Queensland, arrived at an important Anmatyerre fall-back water, Anna's Reservoir, with hundreds of cows then being moved to one of the greatest of all Arrernte drought reserve waters at Simpson's Gap. These major affronts to the Anmatyerre and Arrernte resulted in almost instant retaliation by the traditional owners of the sites, with the spearing of cattle increasingly common.

Walter Smith also told me that the Arrernte had observed that, although the white men at the Alice Springs Telegraph Station shot and ate kangaroos, emus and bush turkeys, they were still highly dependent on the rations which arrived every six months. As a consequence they planned an attack on the horse-drawn supply wagon, believing that by taking or destroying the rations they would drive the white men away from their important fall-back waters and out of the country forever. They called upon kinfolk from Henbury station to assist them, and chose as their place of attack the closest gap to the south-west of Alice Springs, a short distance west of Ilparpa swamp, where the Temple Bar Creek cuts through the range. They had observed in the past that the wagon horses, although having had an overnight spell at Owen Springs, would be fatigued by then and labour through the deep sand. With their women and children hidden well away from the gap the warriors waited until the horses were struggling, then, with yells of excitement, pushed boulders down the gap's sides to frighten the horses and commenced throwing spears and boomerangs. After initially firing their rifles and revolvers at their attackers and killing at least one spearman, the two men on the wagon cut the frantic draught horses' traces and rode two of them for safety towards the Telegraph Station. Meanwhile the Arrernte men boastfully celebrated, calling up their women-folk and children, taking dried fruits, tinned foods, tea, tobacco and flour, and spilling much of the rest of the flour, then walking in triumphant glee towards Simpson's Gap. Shortly afterwards white people gave the name Attack Gap to the site, but of more immediate concern was that these Arrernte warriors had also been "killing a lot of the cattle" which had been delivered to Simpson's Gap (Williams, 1884: 69).



*Attack Gap, date unknown* © Boerner Collection, NT Library

“Meanwhile, on the 11<sup>th</sup> September at Alice Springs”, as researcher Mervyn Hartwig indicates, “about thirty Aborigines from the west had attacked an Aboriginal shepherd called Tommy who ‘having a revolver, defended himself and shot one.’ Though it turned out that the thirty had come to punish Tommy for recovering a lubra they had previously stolen from him, settlers and police interpreted the attack as indirectly aimed at themselves.” (Hartwig, Vol. 11, 1965: 397). This is a reasonable perception, as my own research indicates that the drought had put such great pressure on the main fall-back waters of the Aborigines, that there had almost certainly been an agreement by many Arrernte and Anmatyerre warriors to attempt to drive all white people from the permanent waters and out of the country. Not only were the Arrernte attempting to drive the white men and their stock away from the key waters at Simpson’s Gap and Alice Springs, but in the same fortnight the new Anna’s Reservoir<sup>8</sup> homestead (including a ration and armoury apartment), a stone’s throw from the water, was burnt to the ground and the two stockmen present were severely wounded. There was a dramatic increase in cattle-killing on Undoolya station; and threats were made to attack Owen Springs and Glen Helen homesteads.

Mounted Constable Willshire and patrols composed of volunteer station-hands were so busy chasing, shooting and “dispersing” the Anna’s Reservoir attackers, then the cattle-spearers on Undoolya, that Mounted Constable Daer was sent up from Charlotte Waters to assist. He took out warrants for *Youlla* --- [and several others] and organised a party of settlers and trackers” who set out in pursuit of the thirty men who had been spearing cattle at Simpson’s Gap. (Hartwig, Part 11, 1965: 396-397). In addition to Mounted Constable Daer there were at least two Native Police (the trackers), pastoralists Willoby and Gordon, drovers Ridley Williams and Fred Lowes, “and several others”. All were mounted on horseback and all were armed, including the Native Constables, with Martini Henry and other rifles, and no doubt also revolvers. (Williams, 1883-1884; 69-70). They left Alice Springs via Temple Bar, a short distance south-west Alice Springs, and finding that the Arrernte had departed followed them to Simpson’s Gap and beyond, camping for two nights before unexpectedly sighting them shortly after midday on the third day.

Williams’ verbatim journal record, including his spelling, tells us that:

[ they had] “made for a watering place to have dinner and just after dinner we saw a lot of them travelling along on top of a big hill close to [us]. [We] caught our horses and rode up the hill as far as possible but it was too stoney and rough so leaving our horses started on foot [by which time] the blacks had all disappeared. We were all split up over the hill. I made for some very rough stoney gorges, --- [shot at a dog but missed] then hunted about the rocks and found a jin with a little pickanniny. I called to Mr. Gordon who came up and I left her in his charge, ---[then sighted two puppy] “dogs which I killed and scalped [as] these [were] worth 5 [shillings] per scalp---.”

A further dingo shooting incident is reported after he had rejoined “the Constible”, as well as a description of the two Native Constables unsuccessfully

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<sup>8</sup> Annas Reservoir is near present day Aileron, to the north of the Water District ,as are the traditional lands of the Anmatyerre.



shooting at two escaping Arrernte men. (Williams, 1883-1884: 70-71). Willoby, in another unofficial report, telegraphed:

“Self, party, one trooper came up with blacks 15<sup>th</sup> ---, near Mount Conway. Impossible capture offenders owing inaccessible country; fired about thirty rounds, dispersing them, shot several dogs, broke a few weapons. Later. Portion of same blacks again spearing cattle and horses thirty miles further west. Other blacks killing cattle eastward ---. One trooper and ten hands in pursuit.” (Willoby, 29 Sep., 1884).

The only official report I have sighted gives a much briefer variation of the Willoby account, including that the natives had been “dispersed” and that those who had escaped were unsuccessfully pursued further west, but Hartwig located a further reference which indicated that of all of the spearmen for whom Daer had warrants, only Youlla was wounded (Hartwig, Vol. 11, 1965: 397).

This all reads well enough, but I believe that it is only part of the story. Apart from the one woman and child mentioned by Williams there is no mention of any women, children or older men. Yet thirty spearmen could be expected to have something like thirty or more wives, about fifty children and at least several older men and several older women with them. And the word “dispersed” had a cover-up meaning. As William Benstead reported after seventeen men had been shot, the police officer in charge had sworn the party not to make any reports and “whatever happened, it was normally reported as having successfully dispersed the natives; it read better.” (Benstead, undated, p. 36). This unofficial “policy” probably explains why the two unofficial records by Williams and Willoby did not mention Mounted Constable Daer by name, and why there was only a “portion of same blacks” involved in later cattle killing. Furthermore, it is unusual that Williams makes no mention of what happened to the woman and child, and extraordinary that he makes no reference to what the majority of the police party were doing. His account may well be true as far as it goes, but is almost certainly also a “cover up” for his own protection against any official investigation that might occur.

What really happened may never be accurately known, but yet another account of the punitive patrol by “Tuck”, a man identified by Bryan Bowman as an Owen Springs stockman called Tucker, is possibly as close to the answer as we can get.

“After chasing ’em along the valley we rounded ’em up on that razorback hill over there. Then we let go. We ran a tight cordon round the hill an’ peppered ’em until there wasn’t a ‘nig’ showing. Poor devils. There must have been 150-170 of ’em on that hill and I reckon that few of ’em got away. But what could we do? We had to live up here. That was the trouble of it.” (Russell, 1934: 254-255).

The large number is explained by the presence of the women, children and older people who were accompanying the spearmen.

Further comments by Willoby indicate that the Arrernte and their neighbours, despite the deaths of many people, were closer to success in driving the white people and their stock from their great waters and their land than is generally recognised.

“The blacks --- threaten to burn Owen [Springs] and Glenellen [Glen Helen] Stations. Life and property are quite unsafe here, and no one dare move about unless fully armed. Six black trackers are absolutely necessary to keep the district in order.” (Willoby, 29 Sep.,1884).

That all such major conflicts occurred during drought years in central Australia is a clear indication of the significance of permanent fall-back ground waters to the Arrernte. However there were also Arrernte who quickly realised that an accommodation of the white people and their stock was unavoidable and could be of mutual benefit. On the basis of Frank Gillen’s experiences from 1875, and mutual times together during 1894-1901, Spencer and Gillen commented:

“When the white man forms a settlement, however small, the natives gather round, attracted at first by curiosity and then by the chance of securing cast-off clothing, food, tobacco, and knives. The young men under the new influences, and more especially those who may be employed at such work as cattle mustering, become freed from the wholesome restraint of the old men.” (Spencer and Gillen, Vol. 1,1912: 186).

However much the telegraph station people, station hands, mounted police and others had intruded into the great sites, the Arrernte also realised that the most significant Arrernte drought fall-back waters, with their food reserves, shade, firewood and pleasant camping sites, were now permanently available to them and visiting neighbours.

That this was so in the Alice Springs Water District is clear from several accounts, including those by Mounted Constable Willshire in his earliest publication of 1888. Frank Gillen and later Ella Blackwell, who lived at the Alice Springs Telegraph Station in a continuum from 1890-1909, confirm that increasing numbers of Arrernte men were employed as general helpers about the Alice Springs Telegraph Station and stockmen on the nearby cattle stations; that both Arrernte men and women worked as sheep and goat shepherds; and that Arrernte women, including Ian Conway’s great grandmother “Polly” and her sister, and the legendary Amelia Kunoth, became domestic helps and friends of the staff. And while there were bush workers who sexually exploited Aboriginal women, long-lasting relationships became increasingly common among white men and Aboriginal women.

An illustration of the situation is given by Mounted Constable Willshire, who commented that upon his return from the Darwin region in 1885, towards the end of the 1884-1885 drought, he had “about two hundred natives camped regularly at the Heavitree”. These people must have been from several local estates, and been forced by the drought into Heavitree Gap because it was a traditional permanent fall-back water. (No such large numbers were recorded as camping in the same vicinity by any other police officer of the era). However there would also have been an attraction because of the new exciting aspects, for Heavitree Gap was also the location of the police camp at the time, with police horses, native constables and Willshire’s “quarters consisting of wurlies constructed of boughs; while the police stores have been kept in a large surveyor’s tent.” Although his reputation was later to suffer, and he has often been viewed as a murderer on the basis of murders committed by his

native police at Tempe Downs in 1890-1891, during 1885-1888 he appears to have had good relationships with most of the local Arrernte people. He also comments that, despite long absences on patrols, "I never found the slightest inroads made on the stores, it being quite sufficient to leave a blackfellow in charge." (Willshire, 1888: 5).



*Heavitree Gap police camp, 1906 ©Bradshaw Collection, NT Library*

It is clear from this account that the permanent soakage of the Heavitree Gap allowed this large concentration of local Arrernte people and visitors. And it is equally clear that it was both the reliable soakage water at the Alice Springs Telegraph Station and Heavitree Gap in the next three decades that allowed the Arrernte as well as the white people to thrive, as is illustrated by the wonderful photographs of Frank Gillen and evangelist Ernest Kramer. These depict Arrernte traditional life-style, including family and ceremonial gatherings through to work as domestic helps, and also prisoners arrested for cattle-spearing as well as gatherings of Arrernte Christians (Jones, 2011: 9-25, 84).

The severe drought of 1896-1906, with but few periods of respite, resulted in most Aborigines of the Alice Springs Water District becoming increasingly dependent upon work in and about the Alice Springs Telegraph station, Stuart Town (as Alice Springs was then known) and the nearest cattle stations, and on regular rations. Although the South Australian Government still had responsibility for the protection of Northern Territory Aborigines, the Federation of Australia had occurred in 1901, effectively writing Aborigines out of existence, in large part because the evidence then available suggested that they were doomed to extinction. Coincidentally, as a result of Frank Gillen's twenty five year friendship with the Arrernte people, in this

very year Spencer and Gillen were camped at the Alice Springs Telegraph station recording the greatest Arrernte ceremonies ever recorded in central Australian history. Their earlier records of the same or similar ceremonies and other details had already made the Arunta, as Spencer and Gillen recorded their name, the most famous indigenous people on earth, and also made Spencer's name as an anthropologist, with Gillen his gifted collaborator (Spencer and Gillen, 1968 [1899]). Neither they, nor the Arrernte, were to know that their records, in particular their genealogical records, were to provide some of the strongest supporting evidence for the Alice Springs Native Title Claim nearly a century later.

In 1911 the Federal Government took over the administration of the Northern Territory. By then, as a corrective to his early very negative generalisation about the three waves of ruffians who caused great harm, Barclay independently agreed with Spencer and Gillen's view that "though of course there are and have been isolated cases of harsh treatment at the hands of irresponsible individuals, the natives live in the most friendly terms with, and are most kindly treated, both by the officers of the telegraph line, the few patrol officers of the mounted police, --- and the holders of the few scattered cattle-runs." (Spencer and Gillen, Vol.1, 1912: 190).

However much this comment can be debated, it is time now to return to a more direct consideration of water use and water issues in the Alice Springs district.



## Water Pressures 1911-2011

There was increasing pressure on water resources from 1911 to the 1970s as a result of the changing population of Alice Springs, (which initially consisted of the Alice Springs Telegraph Station, Stuart Town and Heavitree Gap police station). In 1911 the population was probably less than 150. The development of the original “Bungalow” school in 1914, arrival of the railway in 1929 and a Government Resident and family shortly afterwards gave boosted population so that by 1933 there were 526 white people (so probably about 650 including Arrernte and other Aborigines).



*The Bungalow, Stuart Town 1927 © Resonian Automobile Tour Collection NT Library*

The biggest changes in water use and towards development of a modern Alice Springs occurred during World War 11, as is indicated by the Administrator’s Report of 1946.

“On 30<sup>th</sup> June 1940, the European population of Alice Springs was 764. During the peak period of the war there were about 5,000 troops stationed there and a great number of army buildings were erected. In providing water for its personnel the army sank additional bores in the Todd River and increased the storage tanks. During one year 96 million gallons of water were pumped from the underground supply without disturbing appreciably the levels of the wells or the bores. It has been established for all time that Alice Springs is particularly well situated for water.”

“The estimated population of the town on June 30, 1946 was over one thousand civilians.”

And as an indication of greater water use in the immediate future the Administrator further remarked: “A new subdivision of sixty lots was surveyed on the east bank of the Todd River for residential and business purposes.” (Holmes, 1959 (?): 402-403).



*Sandy Cole (of Gorey & Cole Water Drillers) and Allan Burrows, seated, & others drilling domestic water bore into Town Basin on East Side 1963*

*Photo taken by May Burrows*

The population rapidly grew over the next four decades, but has since then slowed considerably. In 1947 there were 2,078 white people (so probably about 2,400 including people of Aboriginal descent). In 1971 the total population reached 10,000, with 372 Aborigines in unofficial town camps. This was stated to be the limit which could use just the Town Basin’s supply of water; however piped Mereenie water from the Roe Creek borefield has allowed continuing growth. In 2011 the population of Alice Springs is about 28,000. (Donovan, 1988: 222-223, 363; Kimber estimates).

Other historical developments in Central Australia and Alice Springs which increased water use are documented respectively in Madigan, 1944 and Donovan, 1988. Water use was affected by the development of the pastoral industry; the installation of the Joint Defence Facility Pine Gap (“Space Base”); an expanding number of schools, sporting and park developments; Aboriginal homeland, town camp and Native Title developments; and the development of light industrial areas. Tourist developments, in particular caravan parks, have largely replaced the market gardens of the early 1970’s. Brewer Estate and rural living blocks have been built south of Heavitree Gap. Modern horticultural enterprises including Territory Grapes on Undoolya station and mining interests are other water users in the area. Coming changes include the development of the new Kilgariff suburb.

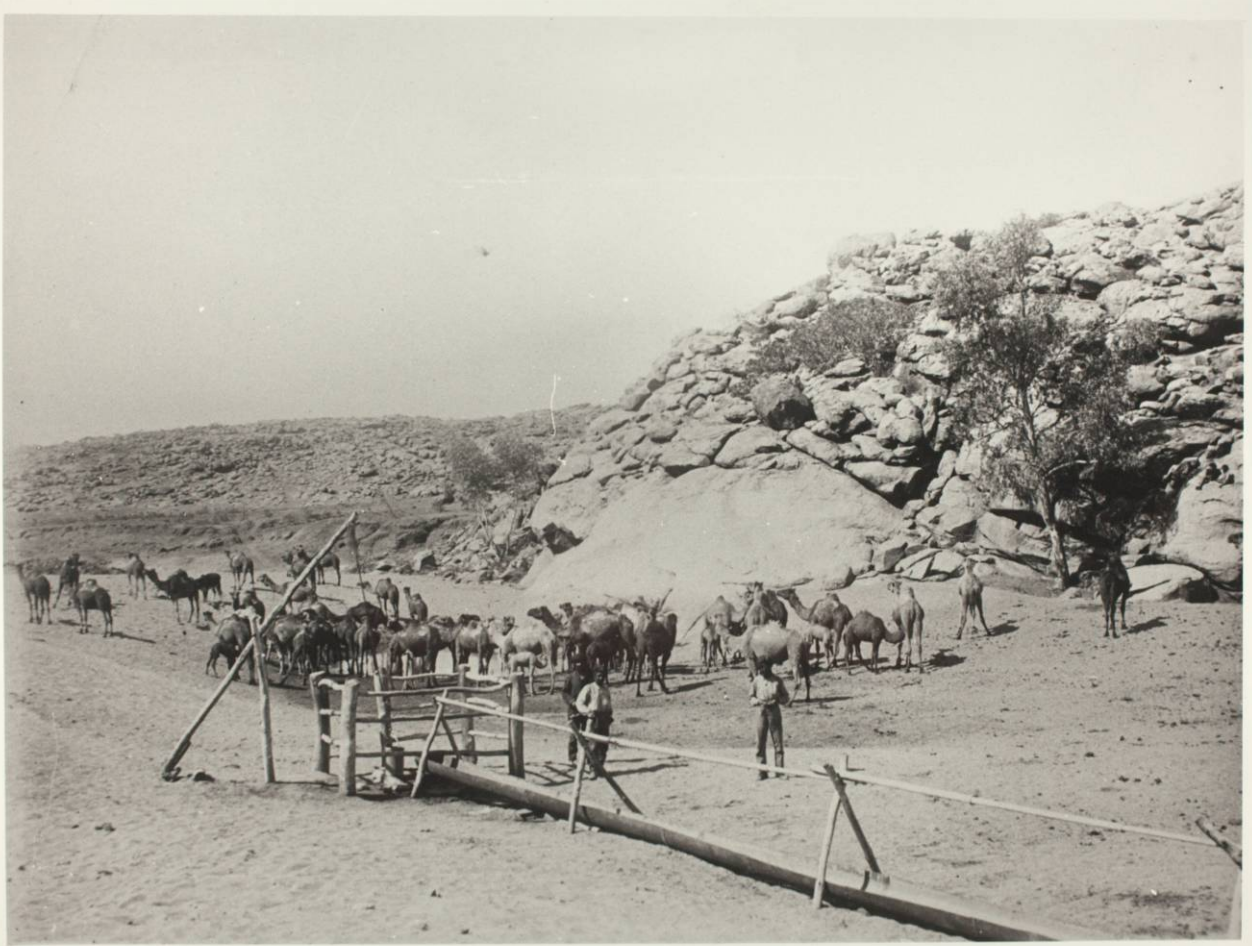
## The Pastoral Industry 1880-1945

One of the longer historical uses of water in the area has been water use by the pastoral industry. The size and nature of the pastoral industry has changed, but while Hamilton Downs was cut out of the old Bond Springs area in 1911, and Simpsons Gap, Todd River and Ringwood stations were developed as a result of ballots after World War 11, the area in use is similar to that when only the four original stations of Owen Springs, Undoolya, Bond Springs and Deep Well dominated the region of the Alice Springs Water District. Simpsons Gap and Owen Springs are now recreation areas. Owen Springs, after initial destocking following purchase from Lizzie Milne's estate in the late 1990's, now has limited and paddock-controlled numbers of cattle as part of the NT Parks management program.

An interesting aspect of the early Hamilton Downs era is William Liddle's association, prior to his marriage to Mary Earwacker (an Arrernte-European descent woman of the Alice Springs area). William's and Mary's sons, Harold and Milton, told me of these early days as they had heard them from their parents, and also of the family's ownership of Angas Downs station. As I had also read about the family in a book by the anthropologist Frederick Rose (1965: 18-21), I was pleased to be able to copy the relevant pages about family history and genealogy when Harold requested them.

As has been previously indicated, in the earliest decades of use of the favoured country of the Alice Springs Water District for pastoral stations, natural surface waters, shallow soakage waters which the stock themselves or station-hands could readily keep open, and occasional shallow whip-wells were used. The idea of dams in the main gorges of the ranges was proposed in the 1880's, and a cement surround was added to Ooraminna Rockhole in the next decade, while a stone-work dam was built on Bond Springs by about 1916, and as is well-known, low cement walls have long been erected at Wigley's Gorge. Thereafter, as Ted Hayes of Undoolya recounted, Steve Adams, a dam-sinker who had travelled up to Arltunga and married one of the Hayes family daughters, used horse-drawn scoops in the 1905-1920's period to create the earliest earthen dams on Undoolya, Owen Springs and Deep Well.

As a result of a major investigation by camel-team of the Territory to check for future pastoral potential in 1915-1916, the Surveyor-General of South Australia, T.E. Day, stated in both his 1916 report and a public reiteration of it at a lecture 6 years later that, while the Burt Plain had good vegetation and creek-lines, the lack of any permanent surface water meant that "before use can be made of these fine pastoral areas., they will have to be supplied with water by means of wells and bores." He also indicated that there was greater potential on the "alluvial plains" of the Todd River country, but accepted that costs of dam and bore development were so great that pastoralists could not at the time develop the greater potential. He suggested that the government might need to consider supplying an additional boring plant to the one already in use. (Day, 1916:18; 1922: 22-23).



*Camels and Whip Well at the Telegraph Station, date unknown © Boerner Collection, NT Library*

In 1923 the able Government geologist Ward had travelled by horse-and- buggy to sizeable areas of central Australia and recommended the sinking of wells at suitable localities. In what was then as extraordinary a follow-up as any, the Commonwealth Government hired Vilhjalmur Stefansson, an able self-promoting Arctic explorer who was on a lecture tour in Melbourne in 1923 and could tell a good yarn, to re-examine the district. He did so in a “flying” visit by train to Oodnadatta then by motor-car, included what was clearly a tourist visit to Hermannsburg and Palm Valley during his brief stay, made a one day excursion to the Burt Plain, and not surprisingly (having read Ward’s report on the way) recommended greater use of motor vehicles, commented that geologist Ward may have missed seeing some country, suggested that an American friend who was an expert dry-land farming in Utah be invited for a visit, but otherwise in his padded out three page report did not add a skerrick to Day’s or Ward’s information and suggestions (Stefansson, 1924:2-4). To mix a few images, as Blind Freddy would have perceived, he was an able snake-oil salesman who milked a gullible government at their insistence, and was thanked for doing so.

During 1925 there were the beginnings of a dry time, which by 1929 had developed into one of the most severe droughts ever recorded in central Australia (and Australia-wide). This year also saw the railway reaching Stuart Town, but with the World-wide Great Depression also commencing that year, there were few benefits for the pastoral industry or any other industry or individual.



As has been indicated, Aboriginal people had begun to work in the pastoral industry once they adjusted to the presence of white station people and their stock. After the mustering and branding season was over the station managers gave out rations (flour, tea, sugar, tobacco and sometimes treacle), and Francis Stevens and Arranye Edward Johnson, who both worked on some of the stations of the Water District, told me that although they always used the rations up fairly quickly, they appreciated the “walkabout” times in the good seasons, being able to visit important sites, hold initiation ceremonies and hunt and gather. Not all years were good though. Walter Smith’s young brother, Clarrie, told me of commencing work on Undoolya in 1928, and working with the Hayes family members trying to save cattle and horses during the drought. However, as was the case universally in the Centre, it was to no avail. He told me that the three Hayes-owned stations, Undoolya, Owen Springs and Deep Well, lost a combined total of 30,000 head of stock, most of them cattle and working horses. I have also seen a letter written by Old Ted Hayes which stated that, so poor were the few surviving cattle, that none were fit to be killed, so everyone had to eat tins of bully-beef.

Any moves towards improvements to properties by use of boring plants and windmills came to an abrupt halt for the duration of the drought and Great Depression (1929-1933), but as the priority once the good rains came again was to build up herds of cattle again, Old Bryan Bowman (who owned Glen Helen and Coniston stations at the time) told me that no-one really began to recover until the demands of World War 11 (1939-45) resulted in regular sales of cattle to provide bully beef for the troops. This not only meant that Aboriginal stockmen and domestic helps were probably at their peak in demand, but also allowed station-owners to put down more bores than ever before, as illustrated by the many names on maps such as that to the front of this paper.



*Sonny Kunoth,  
Bill Braitling  
& Baden  
Bloomfield  
circa 1936 at  
Harper  
Springs  
© John Blakeman  
Collection NT  
Library*

## Conclusion

The Alice Springs Water District serves a lively population from many different backgrounds, yet retains an ancient Arrernte template, with a continuum of influences and interests by modern Arrernte people. In the earliest decades of the Overland Telegraph Station and the first cattle stations, there were violent clashes when, during drought years, the Arrernte found that their precious fall-back waters had been fouled by cattle, horses and other livestock. However there were also always Arrernte who accommodated the white people and their stock. They shared their waters, traditions and songs with those who had any care for the county and interest in them. Now, a century later, recognised traditional custodians of Alice Springs and surrounds are playing roles in developments requiring water. With a new subdivision being built and the population approaching thirty thousand, there are problems of various kinds. However they can be overcome and there are also opportunities for the Arrernte and all other citizens. I like to think of it as an old Arrernte friend, Wenten Rubuntja, thought of it while we sat on the rocks at Heavitree Gap, with the soakage water at our feet, discussing the Dreaming.

“The town grew up singing, the town grew up dancing.”

## Author

Dick Kimber, born in country South Australia in 1939, has been a resident of Alice Springs since 1970 when he arrived as a teacher. In 1974 he became the first site survey officer appointed in central Australia; and during 1976-1978 he worked jointly for the NT Education Dept preparing material for use in courses of Aboriginal Education, and as senior coordinator for Papunya Tula Artists. In 1975 he married Margaret, and from 1980-2000 he was a house-father to their two children, and writer-historian. His historical research has included support material for several Land Rights claims; the biography of legendary cameleer, Walter Smith; the history for the Alice Springs Arrernte Native Title Claim; and numerous articles about Aboriginal art and central Australian history. He and Margaret have two married children, Steven and Barbara. Dick is also a life-member of Brighton Surf Life-Saving Club (S.A.), Wests Football Club (Alice Springs) and the Central Australian Football League.



*Author next to large butt of Coolibah Tree which represents one of the kwekatje youths near the Larapinta Drive railway crossing 2011.*

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