

# 118 YEARS

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and Alan McCall.





# APART



**Following in the footsteps of explorer David Carnegie, we traverse over 720 kms of trackless country, with vast sand ridges, isolated ranges, huge desert oak forests and mulga belts all in a pristine Gibson Desert environment.**



**Some things never change. Carnegie's team discover a boggy salt lake.**

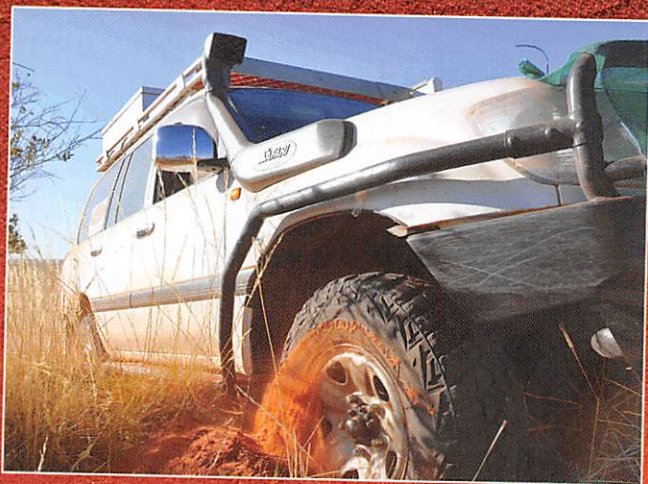


**W**e got the permits," Alan said excitedly over the phone. We had been waiting for these permits for about six months. These were not regular permits; we were seeking to follow the 1897 route of Explorer David Carnegie from Mount Webb near Kiwirrkurra on the Gary Junction Road to Lake Breen on the Gunbarrel Highway. One condition attached to the approval from the Ngaanyatjarra Council was that four Aboriginal elders and six Warakurna Rangers would be travelling with us for a portion of the journey. None of the Aboriginals had travelled in this area of Ngaanyatjarra and they wanted to take the opportunity to visit country. Another condition was that we were not to reveal any specific information about sites visited. After refuelling at Kiwirrkurra (diesel \$3.00 per litre) five whitefella vehicles headed off to the Mount Webb starting point.

**"..Eight to 10 metre high sand ridges ... would continue to challenge us for the next 18 days..."**

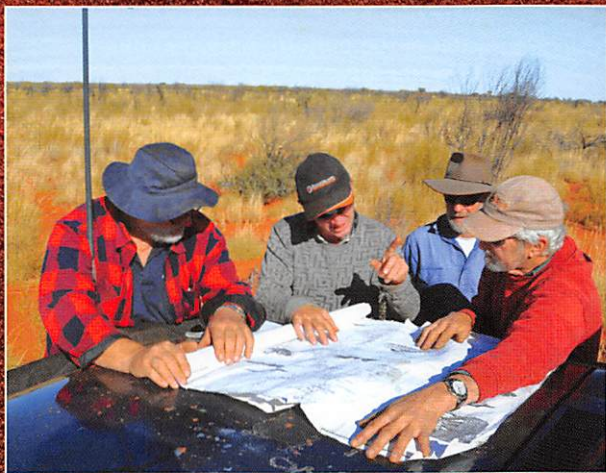
The vehicles included a Landcruiser ute with Honda motor bike on the back (Alan Carnegie Jnr) and a 100 series from WA (Dave and Truthful Phil), an 80 series from SA (Suz and bush mechanic John), a Landcruiser ute from NSW (Pete) and a Unimog from Victoria (Larry). With tyre pressures lowered and spinifex screens fitted, we left the Gary Junction Road for the 720 kilometre cross country adventure through sparsely travelled country.

Almost immediately we were in the thick of tight 8 to 10 metre high CSR-like sand ridges, these would continue to challenge us for the next 18 days, with the only interruptions being clay pans or high ground. Our first destination was an unnamed range in which Carnegie, with the help of the locals, found water in a rockhole. Carnegie thought this range was the Winnecke Hills of Tietkens; he erred - that range was 70 kilometres to the east. To get all the water Carnegie needed, his team faced 12 hours of digging, so deeming the effort wasn't worth the reward they continued. We found the spot up a narrow gorge that had ancient petroglyphs and cleared sleeping areas along it. Carnegie mentioned that there was a far distant mountain to the east from here; this was Mount Leisler at the northern end



of the Sandy Blight Junction Road near Kintore, and it was easily seen from the top of the range. Continuing SE the next target was the Turner Hills, Carnegie mistakenly thought he was on the East side of Lake MacDonald and that he was heading for the Davenport Hills. He had scant information on this area from Tietkens'





◀ **Copies of original mapping provided clues to work with.**

We didn't dig down as Carnegie did, preferring to leave it as it was. We did however walk around the area and found numerous grinders and vast quantities of stone chippings. If anybody wanted to make up a stone age cutlery set it wouldn't take very long in this area. Carnegie found rockholes on a small gravelly area further south; given the scant description we weren't hopeful of finding these. Armed with

Alan's Google Earth which detected possible target sites, Dave set off on his motorbike and some 10 kilometres away he almost drove over the top of them. Phil reckoned that over the years he had seen rockholes in the most incredible places, and that this was one of them. It was only a small area yet it contained two magnificent rockholes one large and one small. The game trails leading to the rockholes showed that these contained water for a considerable time. Carnegie called the

journal thus the errors of longitude made by him. What a spectacular drive it was, the dunes were easily traversed and the dune corridors had vast groves of magnificent desert oaks. Most picturesque!

In particular we were looking for a rockhole that Carnegie said was "... in sandstone on the southern slope of a large stony sandhill surrounded by a few acres of grass, buckbush and Mulga, and a few desert oaks..." He dug it out and collected as much seepage water as possible, eventually getting 90 gallons. Despite Carnegie's scant description our party spent numerous hours on the motorbike and in the vehicles exploring the range. We found a couple of rockholes and it took some considerable time before we found the one that fitted Carnegie's description.



**Evening settles on a serene Desert Oak campsite.** ▶



larger "magnificent" and was able to water all the camels; however we found it dry, and almost filled in. Driving through vast groves of desert oaks was a particular delight for the group. When finally getting to the top of a sand ridge we were often greeted by these magnificent trees - one can only marvel at how they can grow so big in such a harsh dry environment. It wasn't all pleasant driving, we were also regularly greeted by mulga belts that sometimes were so thick we needed to get out of the vehicles to clear a path. The dreaded thryptomene, or

stonny range to a pool that contained water at the bottom. Although putrid, the water attracted numerous birds and the game trails leading to the site showed wild dogs, camels and marsupials regularly visited as well. Under a rock overhang nearby were



as we nick-named it broccoli, was also evident in vast belts. This innocuous looking small shrub is the scourge of tyres, especially if an area has been burnt out.

Detouring from Carnegie's traverse we were aware that Frank Hann had visited and named the Sir Frederick Range further south. We were also aware that at Sheridan Rocks, Hann found a soakage and inscribed his name on a rock face. Setting up our base camp in another magnificent desert oak grove we set about looking for the soakage. Again Dave on his motorbike quickly covering vast areas of country found the soakage saving us many hours of searching. What a magnificent site, it was a dry creek line falling down the



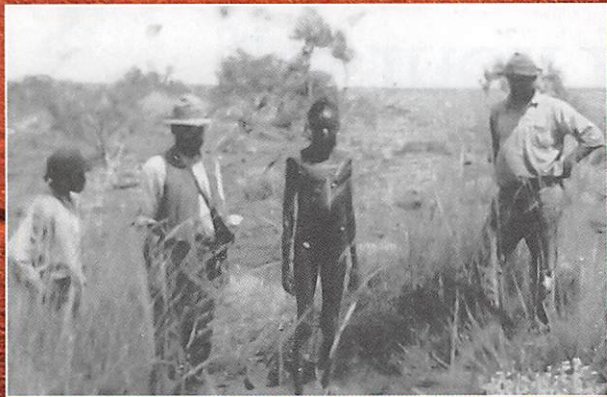
Thryptomene and nasty to our tyres - we nick-named it broccoli.

numerous faded Aboriginal paintings. We also found the trig station built by Hann's companions Talbot and Dixon. Hann's inscription was on a rock 300 metres north of the soakage, it was over a metre long "Hann TD 14 8 1904". What a superb find. Setting up camp nearby in a bloodwood grove gave us the opportunity to again visit this most impressive site in the morning. It was on the return visit that Alan found an "H" inscribed on a rock face just above the pool.

Sir Frederick Range is often accessed by people travelling the Sandy Blight Junction Road further to the east; we had the privilege of seeing this magnificent boulder-strewn range from the west.

Returning to the Carnegie traverse our next destination was Lake Anec and a meeting with the Traditional Owners. There were four elders in the group, Mr Bennet, Mr Newberry, Mr Smith





◀ *On Carnegie's traverse.  
L to R: Warri, Godfrey  
Massie, Mad Buck and  
Joe Breaden.*

marsupial with picaninnies on its back.

The readings from Carnegie's journal by Alan, followed by Mr Newberry's explanation and additional information continued daily, and this made for a most informative and fascinating trip.

and Mr Butler and Francois Mazieres (anthropologist) and the Warakurna Rangers. Almost immediately the two groups began chatting and discussing the trip; what a great bunch! Soon the group was underway with the first stop being Carnegie's: "... rather remarkable rock of red sandstone standing up like a tower." Here, Alan spoke of the plans for the trip and read from Carnegie's journal, and then Mr Newberry talked about how his people would have viewed Carnegie's men with fear and suspicion and watched from a distance. He also advised the rock was called "Markura" and that it was created in the dreamtime by a

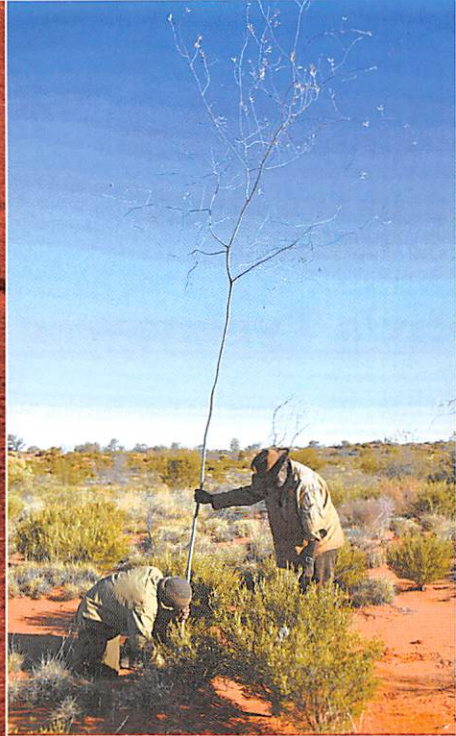
That evening around the campfire, Mr Newberry explained how his ancestors were pushed from this country towards Warburton firstly by other tribes seeking hunting grounds and then by the Blue Streak rocket program in the mid-1960s. His people never returned to this part of the Ngaanyatjarra lands after the Blue Streak project finished. The Traditional Owners had an interesting way of organising their camp fires. They lit five or six small campfires and sat down in amongst them to have their meals, talk and to sleep, whereas the whitefella's had one large campfire, with the result that their fronts were warm and backs were cold.

The next goal was a number of rockholes that Carnegie found dry. We found them filled in; the Rangers set to work and soon had a 1200 mm deep rockhole cleaned out down to bedrock and water seeping in. Branches were placed in the



◀ *Our travelling companions included elders and an anthropologist from Warakurna.*





▲ Cutting a spear tree.

hole so birds and lizards could get down to water.

Nearby another rockhole was partially dug out, amongst lots of dirt it revealed a large grinder.

The job of the Warakurna Rangers was to look after the elders, to clean out rockholes and to burn country to promote new growth. They lit numerous fires as they went along and the whitefellas found it interesting to see that these fires would typically burn a few hundred hectares before they petered out.

A 'balmy' 2.5°C had us scurrying for our fire this particular morning, it was then we wished we were over in the other camp with its many fires. The Traditional Owners group have had a lot of practice at camping out, we could do well to learn from them. Getting underway, vast broccoli patches made travelling slow and difficult; it wasn't until desert oak country was reached



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that travelling and speeds improved. As we entered the desert oak belt, Phil's front right CV died. It took John and Larry three hours of much grunting, bashing and angst to remove the broken CV before Phil was then able to proceed in what was most likely the only 3 x 4 in Australia when he engaged his front diff lock.

Carnegie's famed deep rockholes beckoned; one of which he described as: "having a diameter of not more than 2 feet 6 inches going down almost vertical to a depth of 20 feet, apparently keeping its area the same all the way."

Dave on his motor bike rode off to search various spots that Alan had again researched and marked as potential targets using Google Earth. At the very first target and only two kilometres away Dave found what proved to be Deep Rockholes. What a place; a vast area clear of low growth vegetation with only larger mulga trees

formed a circle of some 600 metres around the site. The three rock holes described by Carnegie were full of water; checking the deepest of the three it was found to be 15.5 feet deep. The area was littered with stone chippings and numerous rubbed stones were found as well. Mr Newberry explained that the area was a special place for the Aboriginal people; it was a place to which they retreated when water was scarce. Although he had never been here before, he knew of its existence through the stories told to him by his parents. Mr Bennet showed the group some very shallow rockholes, no more

*Getting cold backs around a white fella fire.* ▶

▶ *We passed through waist-high waves of spinifex.*







◀ **Mr Bennet at a superb rockhole.**

than six inches deep. He explained that his ancestors would place some water in one of these and then block off the three rockholes that held water. The shallow rock hole would be poisoned using a plant known to them. When the animals came to drink they would be poisoned and make for easy capture. Every vehicle suffered punctures,

**" When traversing country like this, punctures are par for the course."**

including the Unimog, when traversing country like this punctures are par for the course. It became an early morning ritual to check tyres for flats or slow leaks. On board TPMS systems saved many tyres, these are highly recommended when travelling in country such as this. Continuing on a south westerly course we encountered some of the toughest terrain of the trip, with vast mulga

belts and thryptomene areas and some of the tallest, softest and toughest dunes. Phil had to negotiate them in 2WD or nurse his way through with the front diff lock locked giving him 3 x4. Just before lunch and

in a mulga thicket without room to move, a large stick ripped out Alan's diesel return solenoid, and after much fiddling it was back in place allowing us to set off again.

At lunch one of the Rangers lit a big fire, when it burnt down they scraped away the coals and the hot earth underneath, they then placed kangaroo tails (of which they seemingly had an inexhaustible supply) in the hole and buried them with the hot earth and coals.





Some 20 to 30 minutes later they dug the tails out, shook the dirt off, peeled off the skin and it was ready to eat. They preferred to eat their meat rare, a trait that can be traced back to the old days when any moisture was preserved so as to reduce the need for water to quench one's thirst. The Traditional Owners left us here; they had to return to Warburton for an event. We were sad to see them go because we had learnt so much from them and they were great company. They left to the west to cut the Patjarr Road some 85 kilometres away. Continuing on through more mulga, thryptomene and desert oak country we made steady progress along Carnegie's route passing some low cliffs and breakaways; some of which had dry rockholes. Upon reaching the Patjarr Road we stopped off at the vast complex of rock holes known as Tikatika. Most of these had water in

them and had steel pipe frames over them to prevent camels from fouling them.

After refuelling at Patjarr (diesel \$2.70 per litre) our course ever south westerly had us in the thickest mulga imaginable, Phil was out front with his axe chopping a way through. It was as Carnegie said 'wretched country'. Then came more open country with gravelly and spinifex rises allowing us to catch up some lost kilometres. That night was the coldest of the trip, below zero. Once we got our frozen joints warmed up we made steady progress until Alan spotted a line of stones on a rise, it was a ceremonial area. Walking around, we found numerous stone arrangements on the rise as well as standing stones, grinders and rock holes in the area below, an interesting place indeed. The next target was Carnegie's 30 gallon rock hole. Finding the

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