

# Tommy Ninge bong

By Phil Bianchi



Tommy Ninge bong. ▲

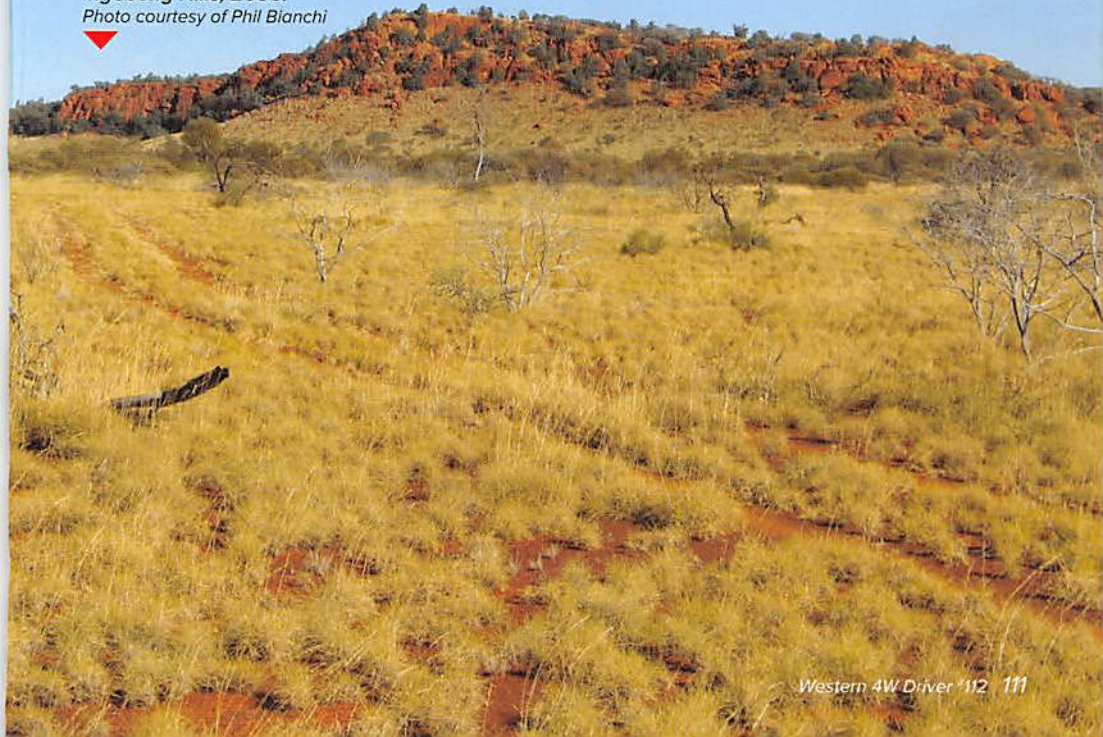
Photo courtesy of Keith Quartermaine

**T**ommy Ninge bong was born at Well 9 on the Canning Stock Route circa 1900. He lived all of his life in the Wiluna, Carnegie Station and Carnarvon Range area; working as a stockman, tracker, horse breaker, dogger, camp cook and gardener. The spelling of his surname is Ninge bong and not Inge bong as thought by many. He however, preferred to be known as Tommy.

Tommy didn't see himself as an Aborigine living in a whiteman's world; he saw himself as a person living within the Wiluna district community and was welcomed and treated as such. He was held in high regard by Wiluna identities, with many willing to provide assistance and help him fight bureaucracy to protect his rights. Tommy was never initiated; he left his tribal group when quite young.

*Inge bong Hills, 2006.*

Photo courtesy of Phil Bianchi





His first brush with white men occurred during the construction of Well 9 on the Canning Stock Route in 1908 when explosives were detonated. His terrified mother grabbed him and they ran off.

Henry Ward snr was at Windich Springs circa 1912; Tommy and two other boys were there and offered jobs. Tommy first worked as a stock boy on Millbillillie Station, then lived with Fred Pope near Granite Peak Station. Pope taught him saddlery and horse handling. By 1919 Tommy was breaking horses for Indian Army remounts and the Australian Light Horse.

Tommy was a strong man; in the 1930s, locals encouraged him to enter the shot put event at the Wiluna sports day. In preparation for the event Tommy practiced by throwing a small anvil. When it came to his turn he found the shot was half the weight of the anvil, he put it so far he embarrassed the competition.



▲ Tommy Ningepong working sheep on Earacheedy Station, 1950s.

*Photo courtesy of Norma Ward*

On one occasion during fencing on Millrose Station, the fencers were unable to get a cart, loaded with fencing wire across a lake. Picking up three coils of wire at one time, one on each shoulder and one around his neck, a total weight of around 150 kilos, Tommy took them across.

Tommy was an expert tracker and bushman; he first rose to prominence through his expert tracking abilities; skills that enabled him to lead a police party through the desert in search of and the eventual arrest of the murderers of Joseph Wilkins, killed in 1936.



▲ L to R. Bruce Small, Tommy Ningepong and Sue Small.

*Photo courtesy of Joy Smith*





Ningebong was then engaged to act as interpreter at their trial. At the trial he said he found Wilkins' dead horse at Well 13 on the CSR, he recognised it by its white face and one eye. He followed the horse tracks to Well 15 and lost them and went back to Wiluna. Returning with Constables Larsen and Pollard, they found the body of Wilkins. Ningebong recognised Wilkins' red hair and the saddles and saddle bags, in particular the britching of the pack saddle by the number of holes it contained - he had previously seen Wilkins do the riveting. He knew from previous experience that one of the tracks at Wilkins' death site belonged to an Aborigine named Maloora. Following these tracks they arrested the murderers, Maloora and Yalyalli at Well 17. Tommy was then asked to be interpreter at the trial translating for various Aboriginal people. They were found guilty and sentenced to death; this was later commuted to 10 years gaol.

In the mid-1930s Tommy was driving a Chevrolet some 30 miles from Millrose when it stopped. Undeterred he hitched a horse to the front of the Chev and standing up in the vehicle, steering it with one foot and steering the horse with long reins, he returned to the homestead.

Ningebong loved his dogs; he would keep a ragged and torn blanket for himself and



*Ningebong's horse yard at Blue Hill, Aug 1998.* ▲

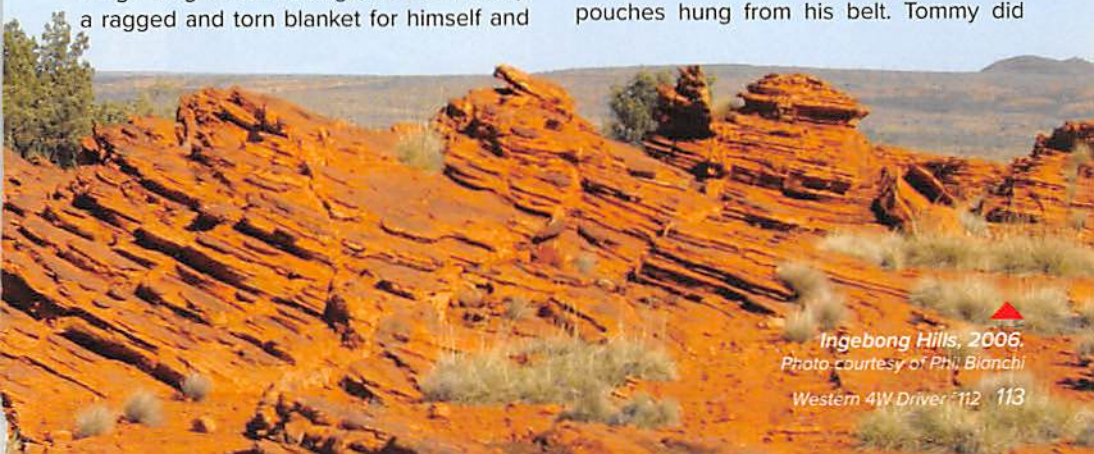
*Photo courtesy of Yvonne Coate*

give a new blanket to the dogs. He gave his dogs strange and amusing names such as Lizarder, Wanderer, Sweet Apple and Red Apple.

With the support of Pope, the Wards, Cresswells and other local families, Tommy applied for a pastoral lease of 134,530 acres west of Well 5 on the CSR. The application was approved in 1956 and he called it Blue Hill Station. Blue Hill was part of Tommy's tribal country, which centred on CSR Well 9.

Tommy had a very adaptable attitude, he didn't mind whether he worked with sheep or cattle and was always working or fixing things. He didn't see clothes as fashion; he would save money by patching and repairing them and would continue to wear the same clothes until they were completely worn out.

He usually wore shorts in summer and long'uns in winter. Watch and pocket knife pouches hung from his belt. Tommy did



*Ningebong Hills, 2006.* ▲  
*Photo courtesy of Phil Bianchi*



**Tommy's name at Talbot Rock Hole, 2006. ▲**

*Photo courtesy of Phil Bianchi*

not like socks, he would wear the sleeve section; the bottoms had been cut off. If he was given new boots he would want a larger size so the air could get to his feet, or he would just cut holes in them.

When Tommy wanted supplies he would place an order with Gilly Isbel at H. Eves and Co. storekeepers in Meekatharra. Because Tommy couldn't write, he and Gilly developed a system where Tommy drew pictures of what he wanted, with Gilly interpreting the list and supplying the goods. Some of the drawings Tommy used included:

- Lemon and melon jam - Tommy drew a lemon and a melon, if that wasn't available Gilly would send apple jelly.
- Matches - a square box and a single match with a flame.
- Tobacco - a face with smoke coming from it.
- Tea - a packet and a billy can with a spout on it.
- Flour - a big bag with no ears.
- Sugar - a bag with ears.
- Soap - a hand with a cake of soap in it.

His cigarettes were always rolled with three papers, looking more like a cigar.

Bill Creswell from Granite Peak remembers Tommy being well liked. He recalls, Ningepong being Fred Pope's offsider and working for various pastoralists around the district doing jobs such as fencing, mustering and well sinking.

Tommy was in charge of feeding the pigs at Prenti Downs, he developed a liking for them, often cooking them Johnny cakes.

Being an enthusiastic worker, the only way to get Tommy to have a day off was to tell him it was Sunday every two or three days.

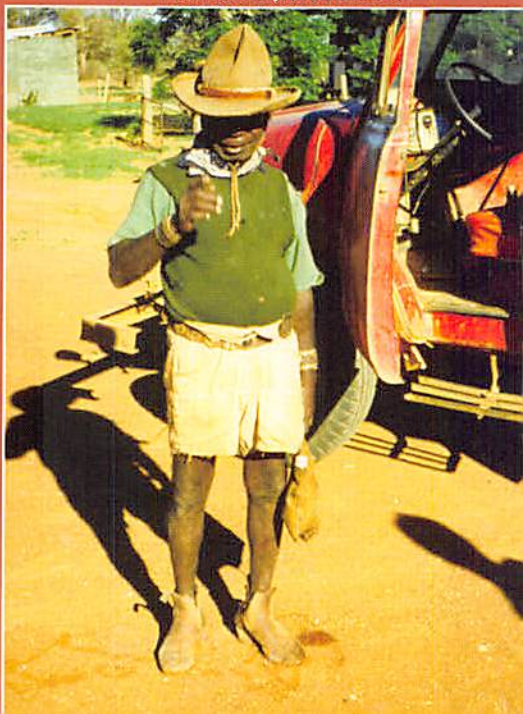
A Native Title determination over his country, on 6 June 2016, included Ningepong as one of the Common Law Holders of Native Title for the Birriliburu People.

Tommy died peacefully at Prenti Downs on 5 November 1978. A number of geographic features are named after Tommy:

- Ingepong Hills north east of Pierre Spring Well 6 on the CSR.

**Tommy Ningepong. ▼**

*Photo courtesy of Bill Creswell*







▲ **Seat made by Ningepong from mulga and fencing wire.** Photo courtesy of Phil Bianchi

- Ningepong Mill on Granite Peak Station.
- Ningepong Waterhole local name for a waterhole near Ningepong Mill.
- Tommy Bore on Millrose Station.
- Tommy Bore on Earacheedy Station.
- Tommy's Rockhole in the Carnarvon Range, again a local and unofficial name.

When making a damper Tommy used a piece of canvas 18 inches square; he then made a bowl sized depression in the ground and laid the canvas in it. This was his wash dish, after completing his washing ritual; he would then tip the water out and use the other side of the canvas which was covered with a dirty layer of caked flour dough. Tapping the canvas in place in the depression he would mix the ingredients for a damper. When mixed he kicked away some ashes in the fire, placed the damper on the ash bed and with his boot covered the damper again.

Dogger Peter Muir had a strong friendship with Tommy. He described Tommy's camp as basic, with a bough shed and furniture in the style of Saltbush Bill. The furniture was made from mulga logs and rails. The table was made of squared rails supported by four posts sunk into the ground. The chairs were made of mulga and were so heavy they were almost impossible to lift. On one visit Muir saw that a small hut had been built, he also noticed the table and

chairs had not been moved, the hut had been built around them.

In his advancing years Tommy worked for the Links on Carnegie and Prenti Downs Stations as gardener. He refused to take sit-down money (welfare) preferring to work.

Tommy had an infectious giggle, he would finish each sentence with a 'eh', even if the subject wasn't particularly funny; one couldn't help laughing with him.

Tommy Ningepong; what a wonderful man, a man with a charming eccentricity, he was

highly regarded in the Wiluna district and a gentleman. My regret is that I didn't have the opportunity to meet him; it would have been wonderful to listen to his stories.

Further information regarding Tommy can be found in the book, *Tommy Ningepong: Bushman, Tracker, Drover, Stockman and Pastoralist*, by Phil Bianchi and published by Hesperian Press.

▼ **Tommy Ningepong's grave at Wiluna cemetery.** Photo courtesy of Phil Bianchi





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