

Watarrka National Park

An Early Pioneer



Jack Cotterill will Not Be Forgotten

by Genny O' Loughlin

Arrival in Australia

When the late Jack Cotterill decided to leave England and come to Australia in 1952, his son John, took out the atlas to see where they were heading. Jack's wife, Elsie, looked at the map and asked about a small black dot in the very centre of the country.

"That's Alice Springs", said John "And what's all this around it?" asked Elsie.

"Desert."

"That's the place I never want to live"

But irony was to have its way and make those 'famous last words' of the wife of a man who was to become one of the great pioneers of the tourist industry in Central Australia.

Jack Cotterill arrived in Adelaide in March 1952, with Elsie and his two sons John and Jim. He was one of 13 people nominated by the South Australian Railways to work on and maintain a batch of brand new diesel engine trains. Within four months, having found himself dissatisfied with his work, he began looking further afield for employment.

The move to Central Australia

As it happened, Len Tuit, often described as the founder of the tourist industry in Central Australia, was looking for a diesel engineer to work on his tourist trucks and coaches, and Jack landed the job.

Jack arrived in Alice Springs in September 1952, and spent two and a half years learning the tricks of the tourist trade, and falling in love with the wild Australian bush. Jack then decided to set up a business of his own, so he bought a block of land on what was the outskirts of Alice Springs, and erected a tin shed, part of which the family lived in, and the remainder became his workshop and garage.

In the mid fifties, Jack approached Daisy Underdown, the owner of the Alice Springs Hotel and suggested they form a tourist company. Daisy accepted, but being a shrewd business woman, the condition was that she maintain 51 percent of the share holdings. So, for 1,000 Pounds each, they were in business, and Alice Springs Tours Ltd got under way. The company acquired some tents, an old Chevrolet 4WD bus, and began taking tours to Palm Valley.

After two years of successful operation, Jack decided it was time to expand the company to include Ayers Rock. This was not an easy place to get to in those days. In 1958, Alice Springs Tours developed the first permanent accommodation at Ayers Rock. It was a corrugated iron shed with beds for 12 people. Business was doing well, keeping Jack's family fed, and in 1959 permanent accommodation was set up in Palm Valley.

Kings Canyon Connection

During his many trips to the Rock, Jack developed a close

personal friendship with Arthur Liddle of Angus Downs Station. In 1960, Arthur told Jack about a magnificent oasis on Tempe Downs Station at a place called King's Creek. It was known to few, and hard to get to, but Arthur said he would show it to Jack. He said there was a big gorge, permanent waterholes, sheer cliffs, and unusual plants and rock formations. On Arthur's invitation, Jack and his son Jim, travelled to Angus Downs Station to investigate. They stayed the night, and early the following day, Arthur drove them north to Tempe Downs Station, pointing out wells and bores along the way.

The last 70 miles through Tempe Downs was the hardest as there was no road. They followed creeks, gullies and ranges, until they finally reached Kings Creek. Jim Cotterill remembers that day well. "When we arrived," he said, "it was drizzling with rain and a mist hovered in the gorge. We couldn't believe how beautiful it was... it was out of this world. The colours were so varied, bold and pastel, exaggerated by the damp."

"We were in the middle of a drought then, and the waterhole with its lush green life looked spectacular against the dead country around."

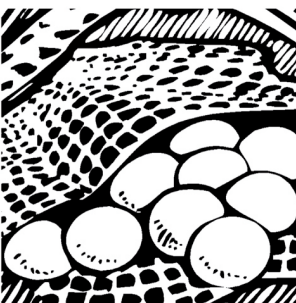
The rain, however, had an ominous air about it, and Arthur was anxious to get going, so after four hours of feasting their eyes, they began slipping and sliding their way down the Petermann Creek to Tempe Downs Station. Jack and Jim returned to Alice

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Springs the next day, overwhelmed by what they'd seen and full of brave ideas.

Jack went to Daisy Underdown and suggested they develop an exciting new area called King's Creek. She wasn't interested, but Jack was quite determined.

Wallara Ranch

Jack sold his share of the business, and after being offered a piece of land by his friend Arthur anywhere he liked on Angus Downs Station, he chose to set up tourist accommodation at Yowa Bore, the most northerly point, offering a good supply of good water.

Jack's first task, and the one that made it possible for so many to eventually visit Kings Canyon, was to cut a road through virgin scrub and sandhills for some 64 miles. He brought an old Dodge weapons carrier, and with a piece of railway iron welded together in a solid A shape, he began. But when Arthur Liddle asked how they were going, they said they'd found the operation even more difficult than expected, cutting too far south and then too far north on their route.

Arthur once again offered his assistance, and called on two Aborigines from the station to find a route. Once found, the next few months proved to be some of the hardest slogging of Jack's life, pushing down trees, cutting out roots and towing the drag.

It was about that time the Central Australian Tours Association was formed to compete with Ansett Pioneer tours, and this comprised seven companies including Jack's new company, to be known as King's Canyon Tours. The companies were to join forces with publicity, advertising and package tours. This meant that Jack had to have the road to Kings Canyon and accommodation at Yowa Bore ready for operation by the beginning of the 1961 tourist season.

With Jack and Jim doing most of the work, that long hard summer saw the completion of the road and the erection of a building ready

to accommodate 20 people. Jack named it Wallara, after the Wallara Ranch, and embarked on a 16-year association with the Kings Canyon country.

In 1963 he sold his garage in Alice Springs and brought Elsie and John out to work on the ranch. The Cotterills worked hard to scratch a living out of the business. Jim had to get extra work doing tours to Palm Valley to supplement income, while Jack and John spent all of the winter months on the road between Alice Springs, Wallara and Kings Canyon. They spent the summer months maintaining the road, leaving Elsie to work in the kitchen.

It wasn't until after Jack's death in 1976 that the company started to make headway with southern coach companies bringing tours to Kings Canyon. Jim says his father wasn't in it for the money, he loved the country and the life, and he got great pleasure out of showing it to other people.

In those days a trip to Palm Valley would take up to two days, to Ayers Rock about five days and to the Canyon about three.

Recent History

Jim kept running Wallara until it closed in the late 1980s. He then moved on to Stuarts Well, 90 km south of Alice Springs, and set up Jim's Place (now known as Stuarts Well). The Dodge weapons carrier (which was used to make the first track into the Canyon) was on display here. If you think the Ernest Giles Road is rough today, imagine what it was like in the 60s when it took three days to get there!

Jim Cotterill with the help of Leslie, an Aboriginal man from Docker River, built this bridge over a narrow gap on the Kings Canyon rim walk in 1962

