

Among the last of the camel men

By B. M. FORD

Andy Everett, among the last of the old camel men, lives in Meekatharra.

He was born in Alice Springs, in Central Australia, in 1900, and came to Meekatharra at the age of 13 with brothers Chris and Arthur Walker, who with an Englishman named Arthur Croft, crossed "the inland" on foot, from Alice Springs to Wiluna (then Lake-way).

Andy was camel-man in charge of the ten camels used on the trail. Andy describes his camels as being "beautiful animals."

When travelling, camels are linked in line by a rope, attached to the wooden peg in the nose, to the crapper of the camel in front.

Camels are strange animals, and were a boon in the early days of Australia, but alas are so little valued now.

Each camel had its allotted burden during the journey. One carried two 24 gallon kegs of water. Others carried tea, flour, dripping, pressed vegetables, preserved potatoes, rice, and dried apricots.

Some dried apricots were stewed once a week and eaten to maintain health. The trekking party left Alice Springs at the end of the summer of 1913. They were lured by the gold finds in the west, also hoping to prospect on the way over.

LAST CONTACT

Their last contact with civilisation was Lynch's cattle station, 50 miles north-west of Alice Springs, until they reached Acqua Springs and more than five months later, in Western Australia.

Men in the party walked most of the way. They wore strong boots, long pants, shirts, and bushmen's hats. The weather was sunny, but the nights grew cold.

The Walker bothers, were tough, experienced men, having prospected for minerals, in countries such as South Africa and South America. They knew the value of a compass, and how to use one.

The party covered about 16 miles a day. When a deviation was made from their due-west parallel, to get water, they invariably returned to that point again before continuing west.

Smoke signals sent up at 6 am received smoke signals in reply, which meant Aboriginals and a water soak.

The "boss" and Andy

would then set off towards the smoke signals, sometimes 20 miles away, with three scout camels.

The Aboriginals were always friendly and allowed them to fill with water the two 12-gallon drums, brought for that purpose. The Aboriginals they saw were almost completely naked.

Fresh meat was caught for food on the way, mostly kangaroo-rats, a marsupial that once abounded in the inland deserts.

Occasionally, quondong trees, growing up to 20ft high, yielded their unique and edible fruit for the travellers.

Cooking was done over open camp fires, and with camp ovens.

At night the party slept on ground sheets, with one or two blankets each. Watch was kept if Aboriginals were in the vicinity. No adverse incidents occurred during the entire journey.

MATESHIP

A great spirit of mateship had prevailed throughout, Andy said, and they remained cheerful even when shifting sand dunes made the way arduous. Sand dunes moved north and south.

Andy said it was "a happy day" when they reached Acqua Springs, 100 miles east of Wiluna.

Acqua Springs was managed by Tommy Melon, for the Wolongol Pastoral Company. Explorers from South Australia, the Brayden brothers, had carved their names on trees there.

After a brief stay the party continued on to Wiluna, and westward again, until they hit the 16-mile gate, on the new road between Peak Hill and Meekatharra. They then travelled south along that road, to the 11-mile well, and south again to Meekatharra. Meekatharra was then in its heyday and gold was the "in" word.

The party broke up there, and the faithful camels were sold to teamsters. Andy Everett stayed in Meekatharra, driving and working on stations in the area.

At the age of 40, he married Linda Brockman, and they live in a neat cottage near the town. They had no children, but Andy says his life has been full and happy. His hale and hearty personality proves that.