

## **THE EARLY 1960s ERA IN THE KIMBERLEY**

At the meeting of 2 June 1999, well-known naturalist and tour leader Kevin Coate spoke on 'The early 1960s era in the Kimberley constructing the Gibb River and other beef roads'. Kevin is president of the WA Naturalists' Club and was a finalist in the Golden Guide Award presented on 11 June.

Kevin used slides showing the condition of the roads when he became involved in road construction in the Kimberley in 1961-1963. He also mentioned Frank Johnson who was with him in 1963 but was unable to attend the talk due to ill health.

In the 1960s, most of the roads in the Pilbara and the Kimberley had fords for crossing major rivers; the bridges we know now being built many years later. So for days and weeks all traffic stopped until flood waters over unsealed roads subsided, as shown for the DeGrey River north of Port Hedland after a cyclone, and the road across the Roebuck Plains to Broome.

The building of Beef Roads was proposed to stimulate the cattle export market through the ports of Derby and Wyndham. The Beef Roads Scheme was supervised by the Main Roads Department, which contracted to such companies as Perron Bros to provide the heavy earthmoving machinery. Kevin was employed to drive one of the large D9 machines. The upgrading and sealing of the Great Northern Highway between Broome and Derby was included in the Beef Roads Scheme. At that time the majority of the Great Northern Highway in the Kimberley was only one-vehicle-wide with many cattle grids, although comparatively fewer gates to pass through than in the Pilbara. The Fitzroy River low-level crossing was often closed for months, enhancing the popularity of the Crossing Inn!

The Gibb River Road was virtually non-existent before the Beef Roads Scheme, there being a winding track which forded the Lennard River and passed quite close to the King Leopold Range. Donkeys originally pulled wagons along the track, however when they were no longer needed they were released into the wild and so contributed to the current feral animal problem. The Gibb River Road opened up many areas where there were no tracks previously. Taking three years to build the 670 km of road, it was most difficult to construct because of the many cuttings through hills and the many creeks to cross, and of course not much work was done during the wet season. There was plenty of available stone but little soil to form the road. The cuttings, for example Inglis Gap, were formed using explosives. The country was tough on the machinery and even tougher on the men, the intense heat and isolation having to be endured. It was common for men to be known by nicknames, often because of previous trouble in other areas, and Aboriginal labourers were also employed. The men had tents set up on concrete pads, with steel stretchers and palliasses provided for sleeping, and, by lifting the sides of the

tents, they had air conditioning along with less welcome visits from dangerous pests such as centipedes. Every week a 'killer' beast would be shot and cut up for meat on site and the camps always had good cooks. The men became used to drinking 'Kimberley Cool', ie hot, beer and every month they would go into Wyndham for two days, sleeping on the top floor of the Wyndham Hotel and generally making merry! Kevin's slides demonstrated the stark difference between the 91-mile camp in the early 1960s and the present-day Argyle Diamond mine camp facilities which are close to the site of the old camp.

Kevin showed a number of slides of the different earthmoving machines used, including one of himself strapped into the driving seat, and pointed out the 'panic stick' which was used to stop the vehicle very suddenly if necessary. In 1961 the men were paid well but they worked a very long day from 4 a.m. until 8- 9 p.m., earning one pound per hour for 6 days. Half of Sunday was used for doing vehicle maintenance. Burnt acacia stems often punctured the machine tyres, and some of the bigger tyres cost as much as a new Holden car. There was plenty of money available for the Beef Roads Scheme nonetheless.

In 1961 cattle were still being moved across country by drovers, but by 1963 the beef exports from WA trebled due to the better roads enabling faster transport. The trucks used for transport were considered giants at that time but are now even bigger. The Wyndham meat works operated from 1919 to 1985 but only for the months April to November. It would take the abattoir workers, "meaties", 14 days to get to and from Wyndham in the early days. The cattle came from 13 stations, and the meat was packed into cardboard cartons and exported to the USA for hamburger meat.

Among Kevin's slides were a number showing Broome and surrounding area, with Carnarvon Street in 1961 showing little resemblance to the thriving tourist mecca where Chinatown is now. Thirty-eight years has seen an enormous boom in tourism in the Kimberley, and the development of the Ord River Scheme and the construction of the modern town of Kununurra have all contributed to this boom. The Diversion Dam over the Ord River at Bandicoot Bar near Kununurra was commenced in 1960 and completed by 1963. Built with 20 steel radial gates, it was an engineering feat at the time.

Kevin completed his talk by sneaking in a slide of what he considers to be the 'biggest Boab tree in the Kimberley'! It is on the Dunham River on Kingston Rest station and is 58 feet (17.6784 metres) in circumference at a height of 4 feet 3 inches. Any more challengers??

*Daphne Choules Edinger and Bev Phillips*

**Editor's notes:** For those who are not familiar with the search for the "World's Biggest Boab", Mike Donaldson started the quest in August 1995 when he nominated 'a particularly large and bulbous' tree with a circumference (at chest height) of about 16 metres. That specimen is at the junction of the Sprigg and Isdell Rivers, about 15 km east of Mount Hart Station. Ian Elliot waded in two months later with two historical references to trees, one on Kimberley Downs Station with a 67-foot (20.4-metre) circumference and the other at Camden Harbour with a 50-foot (15.2-metre) diameter, for which Ian claimed a 48-metre circumference. Ian hadn't been able to find the Camden Harbour Tree and asked whether anyone could confirm whether the Kimberley Downs tree was still alive. No-one came forward with information but, in April 1998, Mike reported the existence of a South African boab with a diameter of 46 metres, putting our trees in the shade. The same newsletter reported that the Three Mile Caravan Park at Wyndham boasts a tree which, weighing in with a circumference of 25 metres, is described as "Australia's largest Boab Tree in Captivity". Whether it is larger than the boabs to which Pat Lowe refers in *The Boab Tree* is unknown. Does anyone know the circumference of the 'old Grandmother' in the Logue River grove mentioned on p. 20?