

Posties of the West Australian Outback

Jan Gane

Mail of the outback in the 1930's – posted under a stone in the dust, or impaled on a station gate or a forked stick in the middle of a track.

Some scratched in "infinitesimal calligraphy" on the back of a matchbox. Some written round and round with a nail in the grooves of the lid of a beef-tin. Others scratched with a penknife on bullock hide and bark. All delivered to the postmaster in his tin shack among the coongaberry bushes, to re-copy and rubber stamp.

In return the outback postie would deliver wires (a month old), weeklies dated a year back, love and home letters. Even letters from the other side of the world marked *Addressee unknown*, or simply *Scotty Johnson - Station Cook* or *Dobson of Australia* would somehow find their mark.

When the big rivers of Fitzroy and the Ord were flood-swollen, when aeroplanes couldn't land and a truck was worse than useless, the outback postie and his ponies delivered the mail "*with all the splendid casual courage of the Anzacs*".



Bill Collins's Meekatharra & Marble Bar Royal Mail Truck bogged on its route, Western Australia, 1941.

112803PD:



14 foot crocodile trapped at the Wyndham Meatworks in 1926

BA1410/1/107

It was Dave Edgar who had half his foot bitten off by a crocodile, wrapped what was left of it in a saddle-cloth and the toes in newspaper. Then rode 200 miles to the doctor at Derby to see what could be done about it.

It was Jack McDonald who swam the packs across a swollen river; and then had to sit down and re-write the whole sodden mail in lead-pencil in a pad.

It was Gordon Whale, "The Big Fish", who in a truck tied together with string, made a record long journey from the Fitzroy to Hall's Creek. Thumping home at last through the gorges to the cheers of the populace, his tyres stuffed with blankets and clothing, a horde of men pushing.

Another outback postie was bogged for almost two weeks and existed solely on 21 dozen eggs taken from a consignment he was carrying. When rescued, there were so many eggshells scattered about, that name 'Eggshell Flat' was adopted for the spot and a signboard nailed to a big gumtree.

Last but not least the story of a pack-horse postie and an old prospector who came to him with a couple of queer-looking beetles in a tin. "Look here" said the old man "I want you to send these rare insects down to the Museum for me."

Eventually the museum wrote back that the beetles were by no means rare but that did not discourage the old man. Thereafter, nearly every week, he sent specimens of some sort to the Museum, leaving the postie to write all the letters and make parcels of the specimens when he returned to the post office.

Unfortunately though the old man's mania for collecting things cost him his life. He was poking about under a log one day, when he was bitten by a venomous snake. He managed to get back to his camp, but shortly after collapsed and died. Later the postie discovered that he was the sole beneficiary of the old man's life savings - £ 4,000!

Friend and confidant to the whole of the outback, the outback postie in the 1930's was entrusted with the "close secrets of life" – wires to send, shares to barter, dingo-scalps for the local vermin board's office and small tins of rough gold - to be exchanged for presents and tobacco at the little bush store.

At every stopping-place the postie was also private secretary, bush lawyer, nurse, doctor and guardian angel. It was all in a day's work for these outback heroes.

If a postie was overdue by more than three weeks, a search party was sent out to find him. Sometimes though, they were too late - it would seem that more than one outback postie gave up his life for the mail.



Geoff Lambert (left), driver of Australia's longest overland mail.
A roadside snack, 1948?

112454PD:



Post Office, Port Hedland and the Marble Bar mail coach, 1909

007630PD



Ernie Bird's mail coach leaving Derby, 1919

067263PD



The Wyndham - Halls Creek mail, 1916

3231B/131



Bill Collins's Meekatharra & Marble Bar Royal Mail Truck bogged on its route, 1941.

112806PD

Source - Newspaper articles from the 1930's thanks to the magic of *Trove*.

ABC Perth, The West Australian, ABC Rural, ABC Kimberley, Australia's Golden Outback, Outback Family History, Australia Post, News Talk, 6PR 882.

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Waiting for Wyndham's first air mail, 14 July 1930

4383B/295:



Royal Mail on the road Fitzroy Crossing to Halls Creek
(180 miles), 1921

BA2596/1/93



VH-UEM delivering the first air mail to Wyndham
arriving 14 July 1930

4383B/83



Bill Collins's Meekatharra & Marble Bar Royal Mail Truck
bogged on its route, Western Australia, 1941.

112801PD



Meekatharra & Marble Bar Royal Mail Truck outside the
Meekatharra Post Office, ca. 1940.

112800PD



Meekatharra & Marble Bar Royal Mail Truck, outside the
Bilyuin Pool Hotel, ca. 1940.

112799PD