

Historical Society of the Northern Territory

Patron: The Hon Austin Asche AC

NEWSLETTER OCTOBER 2023

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HSNT Committee – President: Matthew James; Vice President: Bev Phelts; Secretary: Libby Siebert : Treasurer: Lyn Reid; others - Brian Reid, Derek Pugh, Clayton Frederickson, Ian Anderson & Wendy Asche.

FUTURE EVENTS

Thursday 28 September - *Twenty To The Mile* at the Deck Chair - 7pm

Presented by Derek Pugh. A film by Andrew Hyde, 'Twenty to the Mile' tells the story of the Overland Telegraph Line, which connected Adelaide and Australia to England in 1872.

Tickets are on sale at the Deck Chair now. A Q&A session will follow the film.

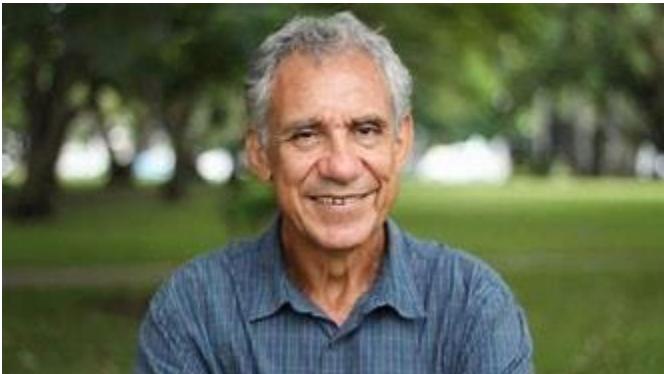
Saturday 7 October - HSNT book stall – Parap Markets

Janie will be selling our books at the markets. Drop by and snap up a special.

Saturday 28 October – Save the date - History Talks:History Colloquium, NT Library

Note this date in your diaries. The annual History Colloquium organised by the Professional Historians Association will be held at the NT Library. More information including the program will be provided soon.

Sunday 5 November – HSNT 5th Annual Oration – Speaker Charlie King



Charlie is a sports commentator for Darwin's ABC Radio. He is renowned for his work in child protection and established the 'No More' initiative in 2006 which used sport to campaign against family violence in Australia. Charlie was awarded an Order of Australia Medal (OAM) for his service to broadcast media and the Indigenous community in 2015. This was upgraded to Member of the Order of Australia (AM) at the 2021 Queen's Birthday Honours for his service to the Indigenous community of the Northern Territory.

Charlie's topic will be "Reflections on the Territory".

Our Oration will be held at History House, 1/16 Charlton Court, Woolner at 3pm. Nibbles and drinks will follow the talk.

Edward Fredrick Reichenbach "Ryko" rode his bicycle from Adelaide to Darwin in 1914

Recently the HSNT has come into possession of old photographs sent to us by Bev Quartermaine, Kalgoorlie. One of the photos shows Ryko's bicycle which was obviously used again for bush work. Unfortunately, the men in the photograph are unidentified and the photo not dated. It might be of interest to members to read Ryko's first hand experience riding from Adelaide to Darwin. The information is taken from the *Northern Territory Times and Gazette* (Darwin, NT:1873 -1927), 18 June 1914, page 18 and was sourced by Derek Pugh.



Ryko 1914



Ryko's bicycle

Arrival of Overland Cyclist.

Mr. E. F. Reichenbach, the over-land cyclist, arrived at Darwin from Adelaide at about seven minutes past twelve (noon) on Thursday last, the 11th instant, having beaten Mr. Albert Macdonald's (previous cycle record from Darwin to Adelaide by 15 hours 23 minutes.

It will be remembered that four weeks ago two Victorian cyclists, Messrs. E. F. Reichenbach and J. E. Fahey, left the Adelaide general post office on a cycle to ride to Darwin. In 1898, Mr. Albert Macdonald rode the other way (Darwin to Adelaide) in 28 days 15 hours 45 minutes.

Upon being interviewed on Friday evening, Mr. Reichenbach said:—"The trip through has not been so rough or so difficult as I had at first imagined it would be, but, looking back on it now I sufficiently recognise that I held Macdonald's time too cheaply, and did not lay up the reserves of time against the possibilities of mishaps and bad luck, which I should have done during those stretches of my long journey when running was comparatively smooth. I spent hours of valuable time some days taking photographs, and sometimes did not make any effort to resume my journey the following morning till 11 o'clock. But, by the time that I arrived at Daly Waters, I found that it was up to me to attempt to make better progress, by pushing the bicycle very much harder, and from then on I went all the way to Pine Creek pedalling for all that I was worth. The feature which struck me most forcibly was that the overland track between Adelaide and Darwin was by no means the dreary, desolate, deserted country one is led to believe it to be. There was only one day in my experience throughout the whole trip that I did not meet someone. Indeed I found it extremely difficult upon many occasions to tear myself away from the bounteous hospitality which I invariably met with right from start to finish.

Throughout the whole of the journey from Adelaide to Darwin I only met one aboriginal who could be classified with any degree of accuracy as a wild myall, and he bolted for the outer horizon as if his life was in danger as soon as he got a full glimpse of me upon my bicycle. A general description of the road need not be very verbose. Summed up it was simply - "Sand, sand, rocks, and then more sand," with occasional stretches of good going. The winds were on the whole favourable, but they were not nearly as favourable as I had hoped. My bicycle, on the whole, stood the heavy strain put upon it by the trip wonderfully well, my only trouble in this connection being the three-speed hub, which was repeatedly the source of trouble and delay. The Dunlop tyres and Coventry "Elite" chain answered to the call made upon them magnificently, and it is really wonderful to think what that pair of tyres upon my machine accomplished.

Overland cyclists or ambitious record breakers can rest absolutely assured they will find the long overland route between Adelaide and Darwin a very popular one if they meet with the same lavish hospitality as was extended to me. Indeed, I can only emphasise what I said before that the journey was of such a nature that, like the hero of the school poem "Excelsior," it made one actually desire to abandon the record-breaking intention of the trip, and linger longer by the roadside.

From railway camp to camp a tele-phonic message would be sent to have tea ready for "The Overlanders," as my companion and myself were generally termed. Along the route of the telegraph line I was treated right royally, and kept well informed of the movements of every traveller and had everything ready for me as I approached, and so on. Right along the route I met with nothing but hospitality, so that I would be indeed failing in appreciation of the way I was treated if I failed to recommend the run to other venturesome cyclists. Upon the necessarily restricted diet of corned beef and damper and black tea of the road I kept very fit and well, and could start with pleasure upon the homeward trip tomorrow if it were necessary to do so. For quite 1,200 miles of the journey I did not spend one single penny. I frequently offered money in payment for food I partook of along the road, but it was never accepted.

I left my travelling companion, Mr. J. E. Fahey, at Charlotte Waters, and, although I do not know where he is I understand that he is coming on steadily. The bicycle he was riding was lighter than mine. In fact it was too light for the heavy work such a journey demanded of it.

We left Adelaide on the 14th of May at noon, and, making very heavy work to Oodnadatta, arrived there over a day behind the time taken by Albert Macdonald to traverse the distance between the two places. Fahey was already in trouble over the heavy going on the railway ballast, and sustained a nasty fall, which sprained his ankle. This stage, owing to the repairs that were needed, was the worst right through the trip, and we soon recognised the truth of the couplet "He travels the fastest who travels alone," for the repairs or troubles of either of us practically detained both on many occasions.

At Blood's Creek, Fahey's ankle so troubled him that we decided there and then to part company, and that I should push on alone. I reached Charlotte Waters with my three-speed gear broken. A message was sent to Fahey, and I then had to wait for advantage of the opportunity to have him to catch up with me with the duplicate parts which he carried. While he was coming along I took a good long sleep, thus turning the time at my disposal to the best possible advantage. Fahey came along, and after fixing up my bicycle and taking leave of him, I did not see him again. So far as I can imagine he is now about the Barrow. Leaving Charlotte Waters I was nearly two days behind Macdonald's time.

On arrival at the Finke I found that river to be in flood. The flood waters were about 100 yards wide, and were running very swiftly and several feet deep. In crossing this river I was carried off my feet and lost my bicycle, which I afterwards found some distance down the stream with the tyres uppermost. The rescue of my bicycle certainly saved me from what would have been a most unfortunate and awkward predicament. In my immersion everything was soaked, and I was delayed here considerably drying and repairing, and was forced to light a fire by quite a novel method. I poured some water upon a little carbide, which I had managed to keep dry in an airtight and waterproof tin, and then caused the resultant gas to ignite by means of discharging my revolver through it.

After getting away from the Finke I found that I had a good deal of walking to do over the heavy sand and entered the dreaded Depot sand-hill country. I hoped to find this sand good after the rains, but, un-fortunately, teams had passed over it ahead of me, and cut the track up a good deal. Getting ahead of the teams, however, I struck a fine camel pad to Alice Springs, and did good time.

Alice Springs to Barrow Creek was fine going over spinifex. I spent one night between Barrow and the Tennant beside a well, with one of Murray Aunger's discarded motor tyres for a pillow. I was indeed a very hungry man that night, for I missed my provisions, and had to fall back upon beef tabloids, which, while generally credited with being very nourishing, are certainly not very filling.

The road from there to Attack Creek proved to be good going. Here I met the Rev. Wilkinson, the Church of England bush missionary. He had a good number of pack horses with him, and stated that he had not tasted vegetables since Christmas. The water here was the best that I found on the trip.

From Attack Creek to Banka Banka was heavy going, and here I met with native who figured in the published experiences of Francis Birtles in his overland bicycle trip. Arrived at the Powell, the country became very dry, and the weather oppressive. Beyond Newcastle Waters I had another break with the three-speed hub, and, finding Frew Ponds dry, had to sink three holes for water. I noticed that, when I commenced to sink these holes, there was not a single sign of any bird life around me, but, when I had completed my work, there were flocks of birds hovering about.

Further on I came to Milner's well; which is 275 feet deep, and it seemed almost an eternity getting water out of it, and when I did get water I found it absolutely stinking. Of course I boiled most of the suspicious looking water I had to drink, and drank a good deal of coffee. The well had evidently become a resting place for the decomposing bodies of dogs and other odoriferous matter. I heard afterwards that a good deal of money had been spent in fixing up one of these wells, but that the great essential of providing a proper cover for it had been neglected. The wells generally at this stage of my journey were in bad repair.

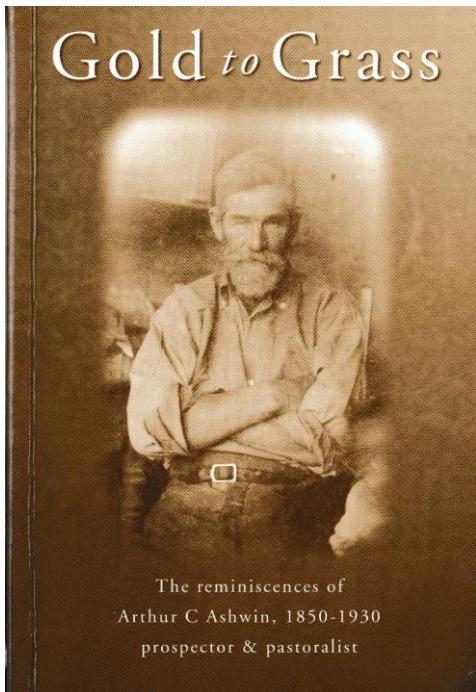
Nearing Elsie, I entered the tropical vegetation belt, and was troubled greatly with grass seeds, which, at times, nearly drove me frantic with irritation. At the Bitter Springs I camped with the survey party on the site of the suggested inland capital city for the Northern Territory, and the dingoes howled all through the night.

Bitter Springs to the Katherine was only fair going, and from Katherine to Pine Creek can be simply described as being something similar. The journey between the terminus of the Northern Territory railway at Pine Creek and the goal of my pilgrimage at Darwin was rough, the journey being mainly along the railway line.

The stage Daly to Katherine, which was covered by Francis Birtles in seven days, and declared by him to be a lonely land on which he saw no human being, I covered in two days and saw no less than seven parties of men. This speaks somewhat in favour of the Federal regime which is sending out men in this direction and that on survey and other work with a view to the ultimate development of this enormous slice of the Australian continent.

During the whole of my trip I was never annoyed by the mosquito pest, and never saw a crocodile, a snake, or even a blackfellow's spear. Kangaroos, turkeys, geese and pigeons I saw in abundance. Altogether the trip was a very pleasant experience, and, in fact, a real good holiday. I made the milage of my journey, according to a thoroughly tested cyclo-meter, to be 1969 miles, and my time for this distance was 28 days and seven minutes.¹

¹ Northern Territory Times and Gazette (Darwin, NT:1873 -1927), Thursday 18 June 1914, page 18



Book Review by Derek Pugh

Ashwin, A.C. (2002) *Gold to Grass: the reminiscences of Arthur C. Ashwin, 1850-1930, prospector and pastoralist* / edited by Peter J. Bridge

Arthur Cranbrook Ashwin (1850-1930) is not a name I associated with Northern Territory history, but what a find was this memoir of Ashwin's time in the Territory, hidden in a publication more focussed on Western Australian and Queensland history.

Ashwin arrived in Palmerston in 1872 as a young stockman with Ralph Milner's first overlanding of sheep. They drove them north along the OTL and Ashwin recalls the entire journey in detail in *Book Number Two: Memory of a trip to Port Darwin in 1870 and 1871 and 1872 and 1873 and memories of the early days of Port Darwin*.

Gems of interest to Territorians litter the text: Ashwin was there when Ralph Milner sold half his sheep to Patterson of the OTL; and also there when gold was found in the postholes sunk for the OTL at Yam Creek ("though not payable"); he describes a range of telegraph men, like 'Hungry' Patterson – a man he didn't much care for, especially in comparison with the 'gentleman', Charles Todd; and he spent a long time with Richard Knuckey, whom he called 'Little Knuckey' (though I am yet to discover why).

Ashwin was also present when John Milner was clubbed to death near Attack Creek ("both his eyes were out on his cheeks") and even shot the killer twice with his pistol before the man escaped. On arrival in Palmerston, it was Ashwin who took Ralph Milner to Dr Millner to have his broken arm fixed and then scrounged a case of whiskey from Crocker and Pitman, the contractors who were building the B.A.T. station, for the other stockmen. He also had dealings with Darcy Uhr, Captain Bloomfield Douglas, Dylan Cox, Inspector Paul Foelsche and many others whose names will be familiar.

His memoir includes a rare description of the Yam Creek 'township' where he joined the Territory's gold rush: he and two others built a bamboo house 'bungalow style' on the hill above The Shackle Telegraph Station to 'get out of the mosquitos.'

Some credit Ashwin as the discoverer of gold at Pine Creek (though Joseph Darwent Jun. also has a claim to this title) and his career in prospecting was long.

Ashwin wrote the memoir as an old man, much from memory because many of his diaries were lost in a flood, and some of his dates are incorrect, but the gist of his story is there and easy to read. The rest of the tales told in this book, *Gold to Grass*, tell of Ashwin's life as a prospecting pioneer in Western Australia's Pilbara and Queensland's Palmer River, and then as a pastoralist, when he owned several sheep stations in W.A.'s Lake Darlot area.

Ashwin died aged 80, of arteriosclerosis and cardiac failure, in Kalgoorlie in 1930. It is rare to write a review of a book that's 20 years old, but this one will be of interest to everyone interested in the Northern Territory: *Gold to Grass: The reminiscences of Arthur C. Ashwin, 1850-1930, prospector and pastoralist*, edited by Peter Bridge, Hesperian Press, 2002.