

THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

Exiles in Australia's Hot Hinterland

WHEN E. W. Trebilcock, late resident of the middle of nowhere, walked into the NBS offices in Wellington, a few days ago, the first thing that greeted him was an announcement that he was recognised as a Cornishman, by one of us whose name ended with that other Cornish suffix "pen." The next was a stream of questions about Powell Creek, an unusual place which, for 18 months, has been for him an unusual home. And here (as the BBC announcers say) is the news.

Some listeners may agree that Powell Creek's greatest claim to fame would be the pile of food cans collected by the Powell Creek exiles over more than 60 years; but others may prefer the less romantic information that here four men live lonely lives looking after a telegraph station.

For Powell Creek is one of three intermediate stations placed along the twenty-two hundred miles of line between Adelaide and Darwin. The transmission of signals would not carry over this great distance without boosting, and at such points as Powell Creek operators are stationed to check the signals in and out through the booster.

Two men do the station work, others the line maintenance.

If energy were the measure of their job they would have a very easy one indeed, but at Powell Creek the paradox operates—there is so little to interest them that their work seems painfully strenuous. Mr. Trebilcock did not say as much, but he admitted that 18 months had been enough for him, and the rest could be guessed.

Nothing But Scrub

Nothing but scrub—mulga and spinifex—grows at Powell Creek. No one but themselves and a handful of aboriginals lives there. Even the sky is monotonous; weeks may pass before its blue is relieved by passing cloud.

Day monotonously follows day. The sun raises the temperature to an average above 100 degrees. In the last year they had a sequence of 129 dry days, two rainy days, and 124 dry days. Rainfall averages 16 inches. It comes in the summer months. Near

June the climate is at its best; dry, but cooler, with sometimes a temperature as low as 50 degrees.

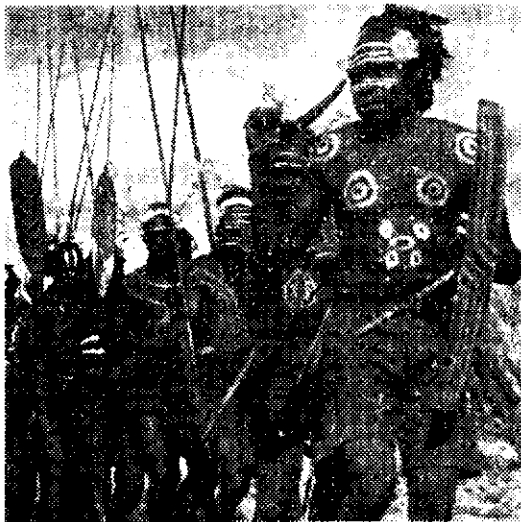
Compensations

Mr. Trebilcock told of some compensations. It was not, he said, so wearying a climate as at Darwin, where he had previously worked for nine months. The humid heat of the northern sea coast was infinitely worse than the dry heat of the hinterland.

And water was plentiful. An artesian well only 29 feet deep supplied their needs.

Stores? They received them once a year. How did they get on for greens? In the rainy season they could grow cabbages, lettuce, carrots. Communications? Mail came in once a month.

No, there were no roads. Trucks covered the country as best they could along tracks worn out by their more or less constant but infrequent passage. The mail was carried by a contractor, who used a six-wheeled truck



"... A handful of aboriginals live there"

mainly built by himself from bits and pieces round a standard American 8-cylinder engine. Naturally, it was called "Bitsa."

Aeroplanes But No Mails

What about aeroplanes? The Darwin-Adelaide service flew the Lockheeds over Powell Creek. Would they not drop mails? No, there was no proper trapdoor for drop-



Spencer Digby, photograph

E. W. TREBILCOCK

"... Eighteen months were enough"

ping things out of these machines. The owners would not cut into the all-metal body just to please four men.

Government carrying jobs were done by a motor train—a big outfit with two trailers, running on no fewer than 24 pneumatic-tyred wheels.

The men mostly used horse transport. He had travelled in by aeroplane which took him to within a bit more than 100 miles of Powell Creek, and had then ridden to the station. Coming out he travelled 432 miles south to the rail head at Alice Springs settlement.

What sort of country was it there? Desert? Sand? Flat? or Hilly? It was just a monotonous flat prospect, with occasional small ridges. It was not sandy, but did not grow anything on which sheep or cattle could profitably be grazed.

Radio Saves the Situation

What did he do there?

It was a bit of a problem. Fortunately radio came to the rescue of those not born in the district and accustomed to the isolation. They received all Australian stations well, had their news straight from Daventry, and could get excellent musical programmes from the Dutch Java station.

The Cornish clue was no guide to Mr. Trebilcock's birthplace. Nor was his accent, for he spoke if anything like most New Zealanders. He admitted Adelaide as his home town, and so proved the mistake of expecting South Australians to resemble Sydney people.

He had been in New Zealand for three weeks and was returning to Australia almost immediately. But first of all he had to make the acquaintance of a Wellington man who has also worked in the Never-Never.

He left us with the impression that no one would ever deliberately go to visit Powell Creek—unless to admire "Tin Can Gully."