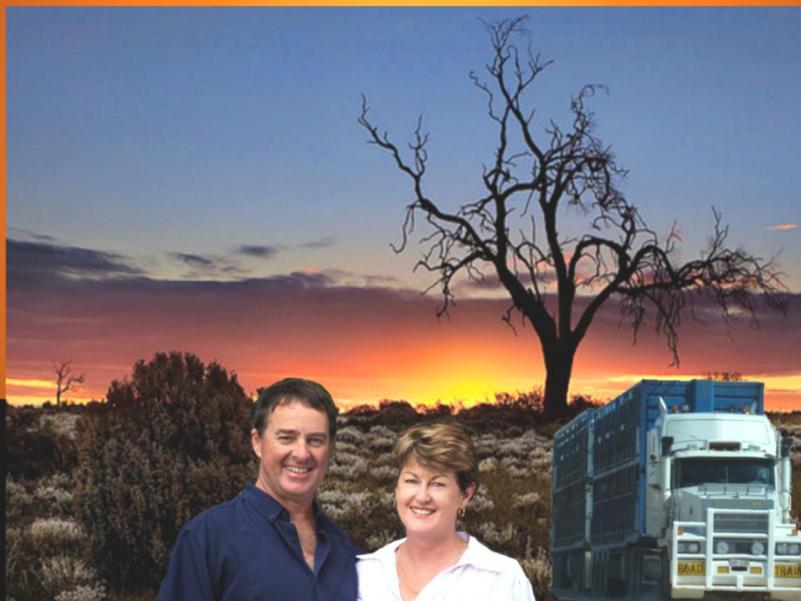


# Characters & Campfires

## Road Train Adventures



Graham Reid

# CHARACTERS AND CAMPFIRES

## Road Train Adventures

### SCENIC HEAVEN



**Bungle Bungles - Kimberleys**

When travellers on our Air Safari catch their first glimpse of the Kimberleys, their reactions range from silent awe to loud amazement. I've flown over them at least six times, but each time I see them I'm lost for words – and as those who know me will agree, that doesn't happen often.

Twenty years ago when I was driving road trains in the Kimberley, the Northern Territory and across the Nullarbor, I never saw them from the air but I got to know them very well at ground level. The first time I drove through the Kimberley I was blown away by the endless ranges, rivers and vegetation. Travelling to stations and isolated areas to load up cattle and bulls, I saw places that the average traveller would never know existed. After rain, vast areas turn into flood plains. The waterfalls are endless and there are river and creek crossings around almost every corner. Some river crossings are so scenic you could sit and look at them for hours. On one occasion I climbed up on top of my double deck cattle crate, and all I could see was cane grass in every direction.

It's one of the many reasons I'm grateful to Noel Buntine from Road Trains Australia for giving me a start in 1984. A road train, for those who don't know, is used for transporting livestock, fuel and general freight. Think of it as a normal truck and trailer with a few extra trailers in tow.

One of my regular gigs was transporting young ewes from Western Australia across the Nullarbor to various properties in South Australia. I loved these trips and had my itinerary down pat. Leave Ceduna in South Australia at 7pm, pull up at the BP Border Village for fuel, arrive at Norseman in the south of Western Australia in time for breakfast. The trip was 1200 kilometres. I'd arrive in Perth later that afternoon, camp for a day, load up and head off again. As you can imagine, I racked up the miles pretty quickly – one time I estimated I'd done 50 000 kilometres in 48 days.

Occasionally the railway would have cheaper rates on freight and we'd put the truck up on the train at Kalgoorlie and ride across to Port Augusta, get off the train and drive to Jamestown. Here I'd unload the ewes, load up the shipping wethers, drive back to Port Augusta and get back on the train to Kalgoorlie. We'd then drive back to Perth, unload, load up and start all over again. It was an enjoyable, relaxing way to travel long distances. As soon as the rail price went up again, we were back to driving across the Nullarbor.

If I were to list 100 things every Aussie should do before they die, driving across the Nullarbor would be right up the top. People who haven't been there often think of it as a large, lifeless expanse of desert. But this couldn't be further from the truth. It's constantly changing and teeming with life and colour. There are plenty of lush, tall trees in Norseman but as you go east they thin out and become shorter and scrubbier as the countryside opens out.

Nullarbor means 'no trees' and although the actual plain is treeless, there's plenty of vegetation – saltbush and bluebush as far as the eye can see. There's also plenty of animal life, with kangaroos, emus, camels, wombats and majestic eagles soaring overhead. When you come to the coastal road it's a complete contrast, with its steep, jagged cliffs overlooking the southern ocean – such a brilliant blue in the sun it hurts your eyes to look at it. At one point, if you're not paying attention, you could actually drive off the road and straight into the sea. There are a number of viewing platforms along the way to stop and take it all in.

I've seen some of the most stunning sunsets in my life in the Nullarbor as I sat at my campfire. One of my most memorable times was cooking a slab of fresh beef that one of the station managers had given me on a roadside campfire at dusk. Afterwards I'd settle down in a swag on the side of the road until the snakes got too active, then I'd move on to the top of the cab. I spent the rest of the night swaying in my sleep as the cattle moved around in the stock crates below me. Just as well I'm not prone to motion sickness.

## JACK OF ALL TRADES



Driving one day, shearing the next

It was a rough and ready life and you had to be a jack of all trades. Pushing cattle on and off trailers, changing flat tyres and repairing them on the side of the road in all types of weather, and doing makeshift repairs on the truck or trailers.

One time I was taking a couple of loads down near Victoria River Downs in the Northern Territory. I was driving a twin steer 32 foot body truck with a couple of trailers when I smelt something hot. When I pulled up I noticed smoke pouring out from near the front of the truck. The front driver's side rear steering bearing was as hot as hell and then it burst into flames. I doused the fire and had no option but to take the wheel off, chain the hub up, get on my way to finish the job and back to the depot.

Sometimes you need help and you have to know how to find it. On one occasion when I was heading out on the Gibb River Road in the Kimberley, I took the wrong turn-off and ended up in a fishing hole camping area, bogged to the axle in dry sand at 10 o'clock at night. Great timing! I knew there was another truck a few hours behind me, so I got out my swag, walked back to the road, found a spot and bedded down until it came roaring up at 2am. My angel of mercy said he was on a time frame but would give me one chance at getting out. I hadn't unhooked any of the trailers, and he backed in and was able to haul me out of the sand. Thankfully one chance was all I needed.

I've even shorn sheep – the wethers (castrated rams) I transported from South Australia to Perth often had horehound, a noxious weed in Western Australia. As the first inspection site in WA was in Kalgoorlie, the sheep had to be shorn there to get rid of the weed before going any further. As there was a shortage of shearers in the area, the task usually fell to me. Most of my time in Kalgoorlie was spent shearing sheep – not an easy task when the sheep only had half an inch of wool to begin with. The lanolin in the wool

keeps the cutters cool and when there's not much wool on the sheep the cutters become hot and wear out very quickly. I went through a lot of combs and cutters during that time.

## **A LOT OF BULL**



**Cattle at Nariylco Station**

Some of the people I met in my travels were true bushies and they didn't come much tougher than the bull catchers in the Kimberley. They'd drive out into the bush in their specially modified Jeeps, chase the bulls and knock them over, then load them on to the bull float and take them to the portable yard to be transported to the meat works. I remember one of the bull catcher cars in particular – it was a short wheel base Land Rover which they shortened by a further 9 inches, put a 186 Holden motor in it and fitted roll bar. That thing could go anywhere, as you had to when you were chasing scrubbers.

My job was to cart the bulls from the portable yard near the bull catchers camp to the meatworks at Wyndham. The directions to get to their camp were 'go along the Gibb River Road so far you will see a Toyota track on the north side, then follow it till you get to the camp.'

I'm sure the expression 'taking the hard road' was coined by someone who did a trip along the Gibb River Road in the eighties. It's a former cattle route, which back then, was basically a two wheel track. It was the roughest, most corrugated road I had ever been on and hauling a road train along it tested my driving skills to the max. When I got to the camp, it was literally just a few swags and a campfire. I loaded up the road train with wild scrubbers and hauled them 220 kilometres back along that same teeth-rattling road to the meatworks at Wyndham.

I think back now on how fantastic it was to have been a part of that operation. One of the other drivers was a lady named Vi and we did a few trips together. Female road train drivers were pretty uncommon back then, but even so, when we both met up in Cunnamulla many years later, it took us both about a week to remember where we knew each other from. We'd both been to so many places and met so many people!

Sadly the meatworks at Wyndham closed in 1985; however the Gibb River Road is much improved these days. I travelled on it recently and it was as smooth as the M1.



**Kimberley Region**

## NECESSITY IS THE MOTHER OF INVENTION



Aussie inventiveness – the correct way to cook baked beans

On the road you learn to work with what you've got, which leads to many new inventions. I designed and made a 4-way tyre inflator complete with four taps and a built-in pressure gauge. I used this in the desert to reduce the pressure in the drive tyres so I could get over the soft sand. It was particularly useful when I came to re-inflate the tyres as I could pump all four at once. When I carted cattle out of the desert I needed to load up at first light and get going while the sand was still cool from the night air. It was more compact then, becoming looser and harder to drive on as the day warmed up.

My ground-breaking new method of outback cuisine was not as successful. After I'd picked up a load of cattle from a station in Western Australia to go to the markets, the manager sent one of the station hands along to help me. I demonstrated my idea by placing a can of baked beans in a neat little slot right next to the manifold of the truck. It fitted perfectly, as if the slot was made for it. After ten minutes of driving, the baked beans would be heated to perfection. We drove off, got talking and completely forgot about them until an almighty Bang! We stopped immediately and got out to find the engine dripping in baked beans. Even after we cleaned it all off, the smell lingered for ages, as a constant reminder that my Exploding Baked Beans were unlikely to catch on in a big way.

Another time at the Katherine road train depot, a driver hurtled in and rolled his prime mover and trailers right in front of the office. The cab door opened and the bloke clambered out, still in one piece. He climbed up the prime mover to his tool box, got out the grease gun, jumped down and began to grease up the trailer.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ the boss yelled.

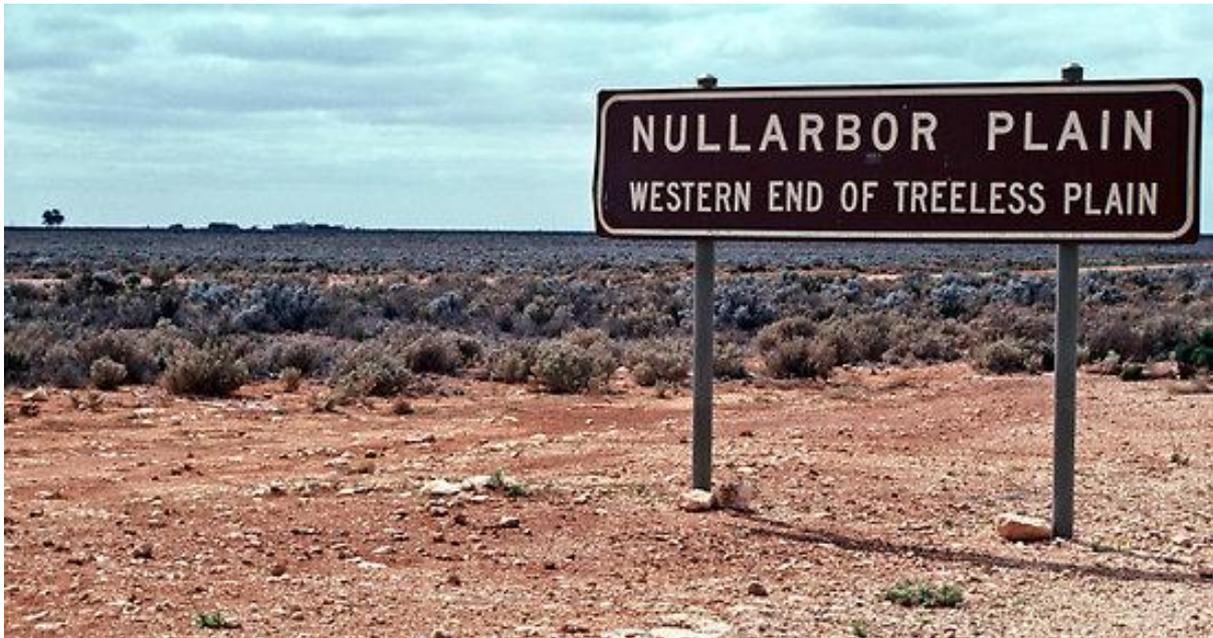
‘I never miss an opportunity,’ the driver replied, ‘it’s not often you get to grease the trailer standing up.’

The boss just shook his head and walked back inside. You couldn’t sack a bloke who showed such resourcefulness.

Resourceful is one way to describe the cook I met when I was sent out to a station to do paddock carting. After the station had mustered the cattle and sorted the sale cattle out for market, my job was to cart the cattle back to the paddocks. They were a long way from the yards and it was quicker than droving them. Generally I returned to the homestead each night and camped there, but a couple of times I stayed out at the stock camp, ready for an early start the next day. One such morning I’d just finished breakfast, the best damper I’d ever eaten, and I asked the old indigenous camp cook how he made it.

‘Mate, you just load in 12 handfuls of flour, a few other secret little ingredients and 5 good mouthfuls of water from the water bag.’

And I thought he was joking!



**Nullarbor – The Treeless Plain**

## CLOSE CALLS



**The road across the Nullarbor**

In my three years of driving road trains I was very lucky as far as accidents go. I witnessed a few close calls and had a couple myself, but no serious injuries.

On one occasion, before my Kimberley road train days, I was hauling two trailers of cattle from a station near Port Hedland to the Midland sale yards near Perth. I was driving and my co-driver Rick was asleep in the bunk. The sun was just coming into view as I came round a downhill corner to the single lane bridge over the Murchison River.

A car and caravan had stopped in the middle of the bridge and a lady was taking photos of the sun on the water. I pulled hard on the air horn. She jumped in the car and they took off flat out towards us. They had no choice, there was nowhere else for them to go. I stepped on the brakes as hard as I could.

Rick was well and truly awake by now. 'What are you going to do?'

His voice was calm, but we were both feeling far from it.

I had two choices. I could either go left or right. On the right was the old crossing, which contained water – not advisable. To the bloke's credit he was driving flat out to try and make it across before we got there. I decided if I had to turn off I'd go to the left. He got over the bridge and turned off just as we came through. I reckon we missed each other by inches. It happened in such a short time it was over almost as soon as it began. One of those situations where you have to make a split second decision and hope to God it's the right one.

Talking of split second decisions: another time I was in Kojonup in Western Australia carrying a load of sheep with a bloke called Tim. We had unloaded and were going back to the Albany Highway to travel home. We were in separate trucks, with Tim driving in front of me.

As we came down the hill to the T-intersection of the highway, Tim yelled out on the CB radio. 'My brakes have failed, I'm going to jump!'

'Don't be so bloody stupid!' I called back.

He didn't wait to hear my reply. The driver's door opened and he sailed through the air, hitting the gravel and rolling in the dust and leaves on the side of the road. I watched in horror, thinking the worst. He rolled to a stop, got up and dusted himself off. James Bond couldn't have done it better. His truck continued straight ahead, over the Albany Highway and through a fence into a paddock, where it came to an abrupt stop, bogged.

It was very fortunate that there were no other vehicles around at that moment. The truck stayed upright and only needed a few minor repairs. Tim, on the other hand, had bark missing from head to toe and needed quite a few stitches.

Luck abandoned me at the last minute on a trip I made from Western Australia across the Nullabor. I was driving a new Volvo F12 truck with two triple deck trailers, hauling 1000 ewe lambs to a property on the other side of Cobar in NSW. I started off well, the sheep were behaving themselves and I was feeling good when I got to Port Augusta in South Australia.

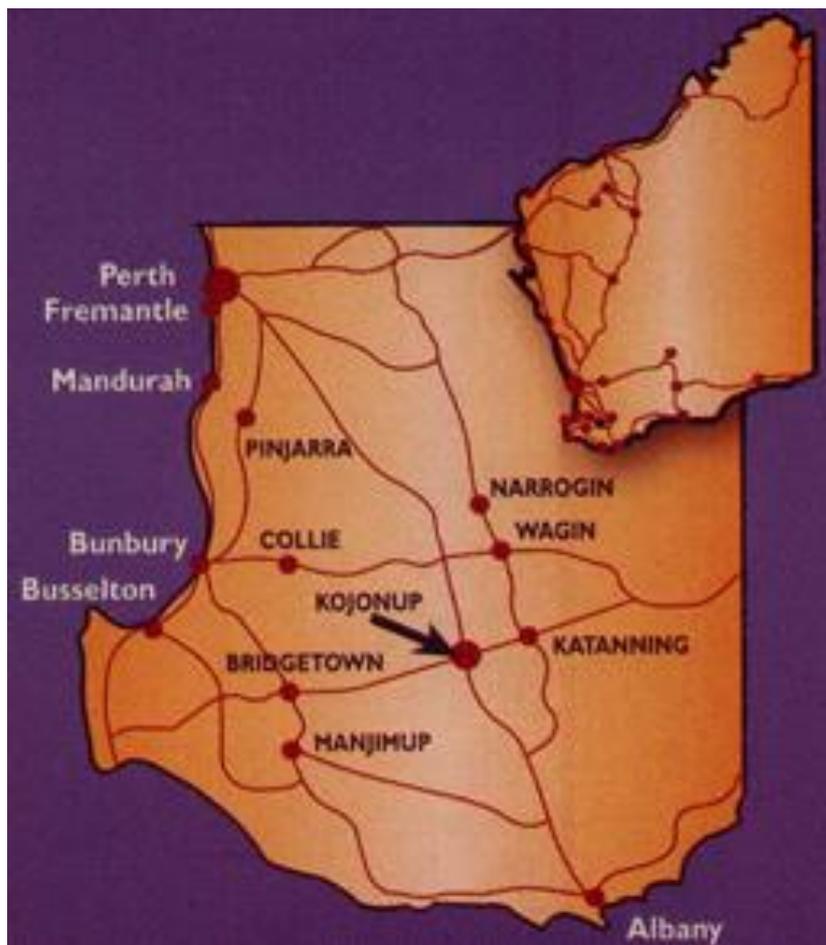
I was supposed to unhook the second trailer and take them one at a time to Peterborough, 128 kilometres away, then hook up the road train and head off again. It was about 2 am and not a lot of people around. I heard that the weigh bridge on the east side of town was closed, so I disconnected the dog trailer lights and continued on. All I had to do was travel 140 or so kilometres and I was on the Barrier Highway heading north. Sweet!

I got through Port Augusta with no problems and turned left to go over Horrocks Pass in the Flinders Ranges. The scenery is striking – the contrast of lush grass with scrubby trees and red dirt and the soft pinks and blues of the distant mountains. But I was in no position to enjoy it – the pass is very steep and tight in places and I was taking up the whole road. My entire concentration was focussed on getting the road train up the mountain. I was crunching down the gears, and by the time I was down to low gear, I had the door open, ready to jump if it started slipping back. The sweat was pouring off me. Not such a good idea after all.

The top of Horrocks Pass was in view and the revs were dropping. The low-down power in the new Volvo F12s is bloody amazing. Somehow I made it to the top and through the pass. The relief was indescribable. I drove through Peterborough and got on to the Barrier Highway heading east to the property near Cobar. After unloading, I spent the night in Cobar. To say I slept like a baby would be an understatement.

The next morning I began the journey home. It was still early when I got into Peterborough and I thought, ‘why the hell not? I’ve done it once!’ So off I went without unhooking the trailers and the dog lights disconnected. This time I got through Horrocks Pass easily – I was an old hand at it now. Passing through Port Augusta I headed for home, in Kojunup in W.A. As I neared the road train limit unhook area at Gnowangerup, I thought, ‘I’m so close to home I may as well keep going.’

So I drove on carefully and arrived at my home on the other side of town. As I rounded the corner into the driveway, the only mishap on the whole journey occurred. I had driven 7000 kilometres, flouting the road rules, twice negotiating a steep mountain pass and arriving home two days early, only to collect my front gate with the dog trailer. The adage that most traffic accidents happen close to home proved to be true.



Map showing Kojunup

## ON THE COACHES

During my road train trips, Deluxe Coaches would often pass me. The drivers were clean and often had an attractive young lady sitting next to them chatting away as they flew past me. I decided then that was my goal – to become a coach driver, with a view to driving with overseas tours.

When I caught up with my old mate Keith in Darwin he suggested I arrange an interview at the Deluxe depot. I did, and got the job. Stropky passengers, creative waste disposal methods and more close calls are some of the adventures you'll read about in my next Characters and Campfires e-book – **DELUXE DAYS**.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Bell Brothers, Perth

Granich Transport, Midland, W.A.

## DON'T GO YET!

I hope you've enjoyed reading my stories as much as I've enjoyed telling them. Deb and I look forward to your comments, so please email us on [info@travelwest.com.au](mailto:info@travelwest.com.au).

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