Rowdy, Hostile Northern Australia Mirrors Arctic

By PETER DESBARATS
(Fifth of a Series)

The Star's staff reporter Peter Desbarats and editorial cartoonist Ed McNally are on assignment in the South Pacific area.

There was only one Belfast Irishman in the camp at Rum Jungle when St. Patrick's Day arrived. But that was enough. After supper, the open-pit miners, truckdrivers, mechanics and laborers started to drift into the canteen. By midnight, Rum Jungle was living up to its name.

They came from Germany, Finland, Greece, Scotland, Italy and a dozen other countries.

"We had two mechanics from Quebec here until last week when they took off for New Zealand," shouted the young bearded Irishman above the uproar. "Jayzus, they would have loved this."

There was a Scots engineer from Dundee standing at his shoulder, bellowing at a Hungarian laborer: "Say that again, man, and I'll knock your head from here to Mary Kathleen."

When the canteen closed, the party continued on the porches of the camp's low, rambling barracks. In the hot, dripping night, the men congregated around battered refrigerators loaded with beer, and gambled and told jokes. Small lizards scuttled around their bare feet and moths flapped like miniature bats around the bare electric lights.

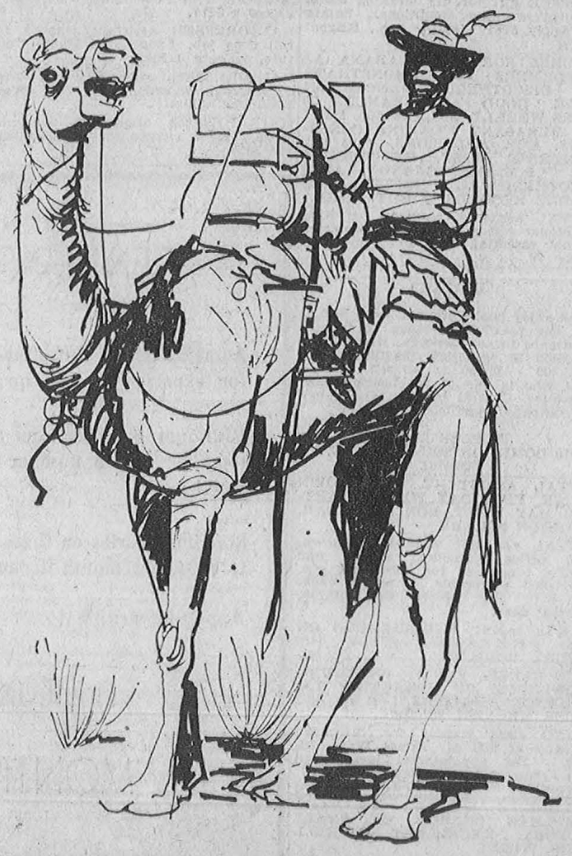
The last of the "Irishmen" lurched into bed only a few hours before dawn summoned him to breakfast — two gigantic hamburger steaks, mashed potatoes, tomatoes, porridge, toast and coffee — and another steaming day at the uranium mine and processing plant a few miles down the road.

A Tough Area

Rum Jungle is about 60 miles south of Darwin in Australia's Northern Territory, a block of land almost the size of Quebec province in the central northern part of the country. It is not an easy place to live in. In the southern part, prolonged drought has turned grazing pasture around Alice Springs into pools of brown dust between crumbling ridges of ancient red rock. At the "Top End," where Darwin is, it rains every day during "The Wet" and it seems to get hotter when it rains. Flies in the air and sea wasps in the water make the beaches unusable at this time of year except to the aborigines who don't seem to mind either.

It is a hostile land but this makes it curiously familiar to a Canadian. It is something like a mirror-image of our own North.

Despite the palm trees and swamps and small kangaroos flitting through the bush, the camp at Rum Jungle was much the same as any mining settlement in northern Canada. And over the border in the State of Queensland was an equally familiar sight—the modern ghost town of Mary Kathleen, Australia's Elliot Lake, which died in 1963. Rum Jungle remains in operation because the open mine produces copper as well as uranium.



Camels are still used in some regions.

Like the Canadian North, Australia's Northern Territory has developed slowly. Transportation has posed problems since the days when imported camels were used to carry freight across the desert areas. Even today the railway which heads into the centre of Australia from Adelaide on the south coast ends in Alice Springs. Goods have to be moved up to Darwin in "road trains"—huge diesel trucks pulling four or five trailers. The 975-mile all-weather highway between Alice and Darwin was completed only in 1943.

The population of the Northern Territory today is almost 50,000, including about 19,000 aborigines. Here again, the native population offers a striking reflection of the Canadian situation.

There was nothing strange, for a Canadian, in the way in which we were greeted by dozens of aborigine children when we flew into Yirrkala, an isolated Methodist missionary settlement about 400 miles from Darwin and the nearest road. It was an "Eskimo" welcome. The children had been swimming in the sea when the missionary's truck rattled in from the nearby airstrip hacked out of the jungle during the Second World War. The truck carried a jouncing assortment of government officials headed by Roger Dean, Administrator of the Northern Territory. As soon as it stopped before the missionary's home, it was surrounded by children, glistening with salt water, laughing, still wriggling into pants and cotton dresses, shouting, "Hello! How are you? What is your name?" and murmuring among themselves in their own melodious Gupapuyngu language.

One of the missionaries, Bill Pearce, talked about the boom in aborigine art. About half of the 700 aborigines in the settlement were earning money by churning out some good bark paintings and a great deal of atrocious junk.

"We have some good artists here but everyone now, whether they can paint or not, is trying to cash in," said Bill Pearce, who would have been right at home in Churchill or Great Whale River.

Large Bauxite Deposit

Later, we walked past towering "pillars" of earth raised by colonies of "magnetic" ants — the huge ant hills are always aligned in a north-south direction — to a trench recently dug on the outskirts of the settlement. It looked a little like a vast grave and, in a sense, it was. It had confirmed that Yirrkala was sitting on a large deposit of bauxite. Within a few months, tractors would start arriving by sea, the bauxite would begin to move out to aluminum smelters and the old way of life at Yirrkala would die. There would suddenly be a great deal of money, itinerant workers looking for trouble on Saturday nights, new sicknesses and different customs. Within a year or two, the half-naked children will no longer come streaming up from the beach to see new white faces.

"It had to come," said the missionary's wife with a shrug of her shoulders. Wife, mother, nurse, teacher—she and the other missionaries had done their best but there simply had never been enough time, people or money to prepare Yirrkala for the "progress" that was about to descend upon it.

Throughout Australia there are relatively few aborigines and part-aborigines — about 100,000 compared with the Canadian Indian population of 200,000 and our 12,000 Eskimos—but they represent a growing problem for both federal and state governments. The official policy is full integration and the removal of all distinctions between aborigines and other Australians, but, after years of neglect, few aborigines are in a position to integrate and to challenge the sincerity of the official attitude. However, a great deal of progress in education has been made in recent years —integrated education where possible—and almost three-quarters of the school-age aboriginal children in the Northern Territory are now attending classes.

Races Mix Easily

At a high school swimming meet in Alice Springs, aboriginal students swam beside their white schoolmates and one of them earned the "best athlete" medal. But there were only two aboriginal parents among the several hundred adults in the stands.

Existing restrictions against aborigines, official and social, were the target of a "freedom ride" into the state of Queensland recently by university students. Most Australians ridiculed the obvious aping of U.S. students, but the riders did draw attention to many instances of local discrimination against aborigines in restaurants, swimming pools and other facilities.

As in the Canadian North, there are a lot of "characters" in the Northern Territory. I spent an afternoon in Darwin listening to Carl Atkinson describe how, after the Second World War, he had bought salvage rights to ships sunk in Darwin harbor by Japanese bombers, examined the ships himself with another diver and then sold the hulks at a large profit—to the Japanese. One of the ships, a U.S. destroyer, was supposed to have been carrying gold when it sank. Atkinson claims that he never found the gold. But everyone in Darwin will tell you that he obviously hasn't been starving for the past 20 years.

Atkinson and other veteran residents can talk for hours about the old days when Darwin was a wide-open town catering to pearlers and crocodile hunters and gold miners. But today it is an orderly city of about 14,000 people. The talk is of experimental rice growing, exports of water buffalo meat, bauxite and oil exploration, parent-teacher meetings and the high cost of automobiles shipped up from factories in the south.

Tomorrow:
What's Wrong With Australia.

SKETCHES BY McNALLY

It's a holiday and workers celebrate in the uranium mining camp at Rum Jungle, 60 miles south of Darwin.