Alice Springs Telecoms

Simón Moorhead [1]

Ericsson Australia and New Zealand

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**Abstract**

Two papers from the Journal in 1939 and 1990 respectively contrasting the telecommunication facilities and lifestyles at Alice Springs.

**Introduction**

The original paper (Dale, 1939 [5]) was published prior to the Second World War and provides a lively account of the telecommunications facilities radiating from Alice Springs. It describes the establishment of the overland telegraph and the increasing importance of this remote town and challenges faced by the local inhabitants. The second paper (Leahy, 1990 [6]) fast-forwards nearly 50 years and details the telecommunications facilities at Alice Springs in 1990. The author is obviously proud of the advances in technology and amenities of the region. He closes with the words 'The area still suffers from floods and droughts and these can be trying times. However, when all is taken into account there are not too many places I'd rather be than a 'Town Like Alice'?. It is a pleasure to reprise these two historic papers.

**References**


The Historical Papers

Page 1 of 1990 historical paper
Originally the messages were repeated by hand at several stations along the route, and in between these stations were many others at which linemen were located. These latter were placed at points where water could be obtained, and varied in distance from 95 to 180 miles apart. As the country became opened up and telegraph systems improved, it became possible to abolish many of these stations, and one by one they have passed out of the Department's control. Some are now police stations, some are cattle station homesteads, and others railway stations. Today only the repeater stations apart from Port Augusta, in the circuits, are Alice Springs on the copper line and Marree, Powell Creek and Alice Springs on the iron, besides these the only other stations remaining in the Department's hands are Tennant Creek, Daly Waters and Katherine.

In those days repeating gave way to 'pole changer' repeaters, and about 1925 relay repeaters were installed at the three repeater stations. But recently the BTO relays have been replaced (on the copper circuit) at this station by Creed 1927 type, and although Alice Springs is the only repeater between Darwin and Port Augusta (1,775 miles) no difficulty was experienced in working Creed duplex at 100-120 words per minute. Creed working has now given way to the Teletype, and I understand that this is the longest physical in Australia on which Teletype working is done. In these areas during summer, an amount of foreign current is noticeable, sometimes as much as 6 m.A. Providing it remains steady, it can be overcome by adjustments to repeater and home station receiving relays, but occasionally the foreign current will vary from spiking to marking or vice versa within a few minutes, and continue doing this for hours, and then Teletype working becomes very difficult.

Nearby the pool which the first party had mistaken for springs, the Alice Springs Telegraph Station was built. For many years it was a lonely outpost, receiving its mail only once every six weeks or two months. At first it came by pack and camel from Port Augusta, later from Marree, still later from Cockrodatta, and in 1927 the railway line was completed to Stuart Town, two miles south of Alice Springs Telegraph Station. Although Stuart Town was surveyed in the late 1880s, it did not take shape until the completion of the railway. With the growth of the town it became necessary to establish an official office, and in 1932 the old telegraph station at Alice Springs was closed and a new post office opened in what was originally Stuart Town, but which now had its name changed to 'Alice Springs.' Business has continued to grow, and the office is now quite a busy Grade 2 office. Some ideas of the town's growth can be gauged from the population, which increased from 398 in June 1936 to 700 at June 1938. There is also a quite large outback population served by the office. Many substantial buildings have been erected in the town and many more are in the course of erection, including a large business house, and other Government buildings. The streets are well made and properly kerbed, and thousands of ornamental trees have been planted along them. The town is dependent on the pastoral and mining industries, and these, especially the latter, are growing steadily. Many cree are found in the surrounding country, including wolfram, tin, mica, gold, silver-lead, and other base metals.

The climate is certainly hot, but it is a clear heat, and it is seldom that we do not have a cool night. In the winter many fruits are experienced, some so sweet that I have seen limits of quite big shrubs covered with ice because the frost had caused the bark to break and had frozen the sap where the bark had split. Citrus fruits, vines, vegetables and most flowers do remarkably well, but the stone fruits do not thrive, principally because of the frost. The town exists in between mountain ranges, and is becoming popular as a tourist resort. Most of the better scenic attractions are however, some miles out, but they are well worth visiting, and there are people who claim that our Stanley Chasm is quite equal to the famous Grand Canyon of Arizona.

Some lengthy mail services radiate from here — that to Tennant Creek being 341 miles, Birdum 657 miles, and Huttita 502 miles. Motors are used on all those services, but in the wet season (November to April) packhorses are used on the Powell Creek-Birdum route...
Alice Springs and its Telecommunications Facilities — Then and Now

Part 2: From Telegraphs to Stored Program Exchange

John Leahy. Telecom Australia

Alice Springs is today a large and thriving rural centre, a far cry from the township of less than 1000 people at the beginning of the Second World War. This article describes some aspects of the living style of the residents and the changes to telecommunications that have occurred over five decades.

ALICE SPRINGS TODAY

Alice Springs at the edge of the nineties is a large modern township, some would say city, of 23—24 thousand permanent population. This is increased by between 2 — 3 thousand itinerants during the tourist season which officially runs from March until October. It is a far cry from the 800 souls who resided here in 1938.

The construction of a mall, several large multi-storey commercial buildings, modern hotel and motel complexes, and the advent of Coles, Woolworths and K-Mart type shopping facilities has forever altered the character of the town. It has gone from that of an outback frontier peopled by cattle drivers, horses and dogs as portrayed in some movie productions to that of an up-to-date, thriving community.

Today the town is largely supported by the tourism and transport industries. The mining and cattle industries, once the dominant forces, play a somewhat lesser role than previously.

Henley on Todd

Alice Springs is internationally famous for the Henley on Todd regatta, held annually in September. It regularly attracts crowds of 10 — 12 thousand people. The event is a ‘mock up’ of more normal regattas held on water. ‘Henley on Todd’ is held in a dry river bed. The regatta is contested by homemade boat shells supported by crew whose legs protrude through the bottom of the boat so that they may run along the dried bed. If you think it is easy, try staying in step with 6 — 7 other people, bunched together in some type of boat frame, running in deep sand, with a useless sail flapping above. You will find out that it is not for the unfit.

The highlight of the day is a race for the Australia’s cup between a team from the American contingent based at Pine Gap, just south west of the town, and a local team. The race, which usually lasts a full hour can be watched by the absent crowds generally appears to win.

Other events such as surfing and lifesaving help to make the day memorable.

Many schools and clubs combine this event with a trip through the centre.

The Camel Cup

Another event with an international flavour which until a few years ago was unique in Australia is Alice Springs. In the Camel Cup. The event originally started between local camel owners about thirty years ago as a race along the bed of the Todd. It is now an annual event held at the local showgrounds.

Every second year a team of enthusiasts from Nevada, USA, come to participate in the cup. A reciprocal visit follows from Alice Springs in the next year.

It is not widely known that Australian camel stock is regarded as the best in the world. In the past few years our stock has been exported to Arabian countries so that the quality of herds in those countries can be improved.

The Ghan

The railway line from Port Pirie to Alice Springs which carries the train known as ‘The Ghan’ is named after the Afghan cameliers who pioneered the route. The train is internationally famous and has been listed as one of the ‘Great Railway Journeys of the World’. In the past it was indeed an adventure to those who traveled it. The old German made carriages, with their polished wood decor exuding old world charm, and the camaraderie that was produced by groups of people kept together in a confined space for a short span of time, made for a relaxed and interesting journey. Today the line and rolling stock have been upgraded to provide a fast, modern service. The trip is still worthwhile.

For those who long for the past the Ghan Preservation Society has preserved 35 kilometres of the old track to E Saxton. They have obtained several