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 telecommunication 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
constructed at the rate of 110 miles per month, was accepted, and heavy penalties for non-completion of the line in the time were provided for in the agreement. Actually it was not until about the middle of August that year that the construction was commenced. The route was divided into three sections — from Port Augusta to longitude 27 deg. S. (about 60 miles north of where Oodnadatta is now, a distance of 550 miles), from 27 deg. S. to 19 deg. 30 mins. E. (approximately where the present town of Toorant Creek is, about 570 miles), and thence to Darwin, approximately 650 miles. The first section was in more or less settled country and provided very little difficulty, the northern section had some difficulties but not very great, but the centre section was in practically unknown country and therefore was the most difficult. Each section was subdivided into many sub-sections, and a party allotted to construct each sub-section. A small exploring party went ahead of each main party and marked out the route to be taken. The equipment of each party included 15 horse wagons, 17 bullock drays, one bullock wagon, five express wagons, 165 horses and 200 bullocks. A depot was established at the Finke River (about 830 miles from Adelaide) for the provision of fresh meat for the men working on the adjoining sections, and 2,000 sheep were sent there. It must be remembered that all the material, provisions, etc., had to be hauled from either Port Augusta or Darwin by horse, bullock vehicle, or camel, and some idea of the difficulties experienced can be realised by the fact that it took Harvey's party, who constructed one of the central sub-sections, eight months to reach the beginning of their section.

It was far too big a job to be done in the time, and when the period had expired (December, 1871), there were still many gaps in the line. A delay had also occurred in the cable construction, and although not far off completion, the cable was not completed on the contracted date. A compromise was reached regarding the infliction of penalties, which were considerably reduced but not entirely abolished, and the South Australian Government redoubled its efforts, but it was not until 22nd August, 1872, that the last gap was closed and telegraphic communication established between Australia and England. The total cost of the line was £79,154.

The original line was a 7/14 stranded iron wire conductor, and although most of it was removed and replaced by a 400 lb. G.I. conductor many years ago, there are still some small sections of the original wire in use.

During October, 1938, it became necessary to remove a small piece of the original wire in connection with the building of the Finke Telephone Office at Finke, and it was found that the old wire was in perfect condition and not showing any signs of deterioration. Several types of insulators appear to have been used. One type was of porcelain, about 4 inches across at the bottom, but having a metal top, two inches in diameter, screwed on to the porcelain. A metal plate bolts on to the metal top, and two holes, through which a wire could be passed were formed when the plate was screwed down. Apparently only one hole was used, but the tightening of the bolt held the wire firmly between the plate and the metal top of the insulator. There were thus no tie wires necessary with this type. Another type is similar to the present day drum line insulators, a little smaller, but completely covered with a metal armour. The metal armour is shaped exactly like the insulator, and the wire was tied to this similarly as is done on present day porcelain insulators. The porcelain was set into the armour by a kind of cement, and a thread was provided in the porcelain for the spindle. A number of these insulators are still to be seen lying along the line, and although over 66 years old, do not show the slightest sign of rust or deterioration.

Old types of insulators used on the original Overland Telegraph Line and a piece of the original line wire. The two outer insulators are the metal armoured type and the hole through which the wire was passed can be seen in the top of the centre insulator.

In many instances the line did not take a direct route between various points, but followed creeks and watercourses. The reason for this was that most of the poles were cut from the timbers growing along these watercourses, and also that it was necessary to follow them in order to obtain water. However, the white ants soon showed their presence, and although there are some of the original posts still to be seen besides the present iron poles, most of the wooden poles had very short lives, perhaps only a few years' duration. In 1880, £479,154 was spent in iron poles was commenced in places, but it was not until 1898, when a 265 lb. copper conductor was added that the line was fully iron-poled. During the erection of the copper wire and the final iron poles, the line route was considerably straightened, now following a more direct route and not keeping to the watercourses. No more wires have been added since then, but the methods of telegraphy used have kept abreast of the times and enabled the growing volume of traffic to be handled satisfactorily.
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 the only 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 time, hand repeating gave way to 'pole changer' repeaters, and about 1926 relay repeaters were installed at the three repeater stations, but recently the BDO repeaters 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 Teleprinter, and I understand that this is the longest physical in Australia on which Teleprinter 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 spacing to marking or vice versa within a few minutes, and continue doing this for hours, and then Teleprinter working becomes very difficult.

Neatly 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 packs and camels from Port Augusta, later from Marree, still later from Oodnadatta, 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 1890s, 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 has its name changed to 'Alice Springs'. Business has continued to grow, and the office is now quite a busy Grade 2 office. Some idea of the town's growth can be gauged from the population, which increased from 356 in June, 1935, 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, hospital, and other Government buildings. The street 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 ores 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 severe that I have seen limbs 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 frosts. 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 141 miles, Birdum 657 miles, and Hulitla 502 miles. Motors are used on all these services, but in the wet season (November to April) packhorses are used on the Powell Creek-Birdum
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 itinerant workers 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 highlights 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. Area 1 can lodge the most protests 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 up 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 cameleers 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 travelled 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 Eintona. They have obtained several