

# QUEENSLAND -GEM FIELDS

## July – September 2005

Part 1

Leaders: John [Gumpy] & Joyce [Mum] Hough

Crew: Ken [Techno] & Anne [Pebbles]

Dennis [1500] & Ros [Radar]

Steve [Stainless] & Sue [Imelda]

Garry [Samson] & Meg [Delilah] (from UPPER Coromandel Valley)

Don [Yoda] & Coral [Lady Latch]

John [JB] & Gill [Loo Loo]

Barry [Basil] – (alias - Baaree from the Baarosaa)

Colin [Crackles] - (alias – Joe) (+ ET)

### Monday July 26

Early am & eager, we departed Adelaide to meet at Mannahill, just this side of Broken Hill, with the other folks that would be travelling together on the trip.

Our venerable leaders' have decided to make this a mystery [?????] tour – ie, all any of us knew was the first meeting point, that we would be away for 6 weeks & that at some stage along the way we would visit some likely places to fossick for Opals & Sapphires.

The highway was flanked with lush green fields, fed by the profusion of rain that had fallen through this area lately & was just lovely to look at. We could feel the "home" baggage falling away & our minds opening to the possibilities & freedom ahead of us.

We were all (?) made most welcome at the Manna Hill Hotel by the proprietor Di & her off-sider, Kiwi, who turned on a great meal for us. After dinner, with a few drinks around the fire, we began the 'The Book' – having a guess/bet, @ \$1.00/head, on what would be the destination for the next day. This established the pattern for the entire trip.

### Tuesday July 27

All on the road by 9.20am with the weather overcast, but fine & mild.

A stop at Broken Hill to fuel-up & some last minute shopping, then on to our over night stop at Emmdale & a comfortable bush camp behind the truck-stop.

Instant camaraderie in the group with lots of good natured banter on the UHF.

[Don (Yoda) correctly guessed the destination & won 'The Daily Destination Book Bet'! – (DDBB)]

## **Wednesday 28 July**

Absolutely freezing cold night followed by a lovely warm day, perfect for travelling.

We all agree that lawn has been planted in the bush; on either side of the road, for mile after mile we are travelling through lush green countryside. It is sooo green that we could be driving through a golf course.

Heading for Bourke today and certain that we will also stop for morning tea &/or lunch at a bakery somewhere. A procession of Emus' in the scrub & several majestic Eagles defiantly guarding their roadkill watch us pass by, travelling (more like roaming) at sedate speeds between 80 & 95 kph. (Who needs to rush?)

Arrived at the Kidman Camp caravan park North Bourke right next to the river at 4.00pm, which is a lovely spot with riverboats tooting, water birds singing.

Just out of town, and to our great amusement, (and with guilt ridden relief) Grumpy, the only tea totaller amongst us, was pulled over & breathalysed by the booze bus.

[Reading: 0.00! - No surprises there.]

That evening, gathered in the CV park gazebo, (another group had grabbed the park camp fire) Sue, Anne & Joyce sat together giggling like teenagers & were named the three wise monkeys!

The mind boggles as to why.

[Nobody guessed our destination correctly.]

## **Friday 30th July**

On the road again by 9.30am, heading east, another fine day, & cotton plantations now becoming quite prevalent with tufts of cotton all along the verge.

On this run we had our first mechanical mishap. At the extremely bumpy Calgoa River Bridge crossing, Grumpys' van brake lock inadvertently engaged. Not enough force was exerted on the brake system to be noticeable while towing, but 40km or so down the road, Basil travelling immediately behind, reported smoke emanating from the van's axles. The van was jacked-up, bearings oozing smoking grease. (Phew, that's hot!) The boys all pitched in, getting in each other way, while the girls sat on their camp chairs in the shade.

[How many Vets does it take to remove a caravan wheel? Bearings repacked & braking system fixed, we resumed our journey.

Stopped for morning tea at Brewarrina & watched the cutest children at their 'play group' in the park. On through Walgett & arrived at the Lightning Ridge caravan park by late afternoon, fortunate that Grumpy had booked ahead, as with the 'Gem Festival' on this weekend, the place is very busy.

[The DDBB kitty jack-potted again.]

## **Saturday 1st August**

Met up with Colin, (Crackles/Joe) who joined us from visiting mates in Sydney.

The Gem Festival is on in the main street, so we are all off early to the festival's displays, talking to the locals, bargaining with the dealers, searching for that elusive 'Opal bargain'. Visits to some likely fossicking sites yield many promising buckets of dirt to be sorted through back in the park.

Lightning Ridge is billed as the capital of 'Black Opal', though why it is called this is puzzling as it is blue/green/red. Some of us didn't have much luck with fossicking, so we 'bought' opal mementoes & some fascinating Iron Stone pieces shot through with beautiful colour.

A bonus for us quilting girls – Coral found a material shop, from which we bought up big. Imelda bought shoes of some kind (naturally) because they were cheap. (of course) Delilah had to buy a pair of boots, hers were thread bear, (of course) & (naturally) Samson had to have a pair too.

The addiction to GEMS was born in all of us in this place – you know, the ‘BIG’ find will be in the next handful of dirt or in the next rock. Keep going!

None of us became instant millionaires & we were probably ripped-off by the locals, but who cares, we had a lot of fun.

### **Monday 3d August**

Onward & northward, we hit the road to the beat of ‘WHO LET THE DOGS OUT’, which thanks to Crackles, became our departure theme after each overnight stop. Reluctantly we say goodbye to Opal for a while, never mind, the banter around the campfire at night is as much fun as anything else we could do.

Basil & Crackles keep us amused and on our toes, as does Samson & Don (Yoda), peppering us with ribald comments to make us laugh. (Some quite lewd at times, but all good natured & not to be confused with blatant rudeness.)

Crossed the NSW/QLD border at Hebel & turned NW at Dirranbandi. A stretch of dusty road spread the fleet along here, but fortunately a light breeze kept visibility at a safe level between vehicles. Naturally, all vehicles received a nice coating of red dust.

[But can someone please explain to me how it gets inside the cupboards in the van!]

Arrived at probably the best bush camp of the trip just outside of Bollon on the banks of the William Creek. Perfect. All the facilities we needed were on hand & free in the town, toilets & hot showers & we were made most welcome by the locals.

It was resolved to write to the shire council with an expression of thanks for their wonderful QLD outback hospitality. We settled in for an extended stay, with plenty of bird life, fishing (unsuccessful) & a full moon over the campfire, why not!

On Tuesday night, with contributions from everyone, Stainless cooked up a superb camp-oven meal on the campfire. Our own little slice of paradise this place.

Next day Imelda cleaned us up at Bocce, much to Crackles disgust, & for most it was just magic to relax & sit by the water or continue fossicking through our buckets of dirt.

In the evening, Crackles produced this ugly looking machine that looked like, (& therefore became known as) ET. Surprise, surprise - an electric massager - to ease the pain in our shoulders & back from leaning over the fossicking table of course!

Our lady-like, Lady Latch, prepared for her massage by putting on her ‘black bra’, (over her shirt of course) the laughter that ensued was enough to cause weak bladders to become weaker.

[JB Won the DDBB!]

### **Wednesday 5th August**

We headed west today, for a two-day stopover at Cunnamulla, and the chance to catch up with the laundry & to restock the pantry. Some took the opportunity to visit the Yowah Opal fields, a little further west, while others went fishing in the Warrego River. Others (guess who) did a ‘shop til you drop’ in the main street. You know, shoes and all those other (girl) essentials.

Here we had the first & only rain of the trip, accompanied by a very cold wind.

[DDBB stayed intact.]

### **Friday 7th August**

Grumpy again fooled us all by heading north to Charleville for lunch & shopping for those ‘essentials’.

This is one of Bas’s old Qld stamping grounds, where he and Marg lived with their young children during his days with Qld Dept of Ag, so he had quite a few mates to catch up with while in the area.

We settled for the night in a bush camp at Ward River just west of Charleville.

This was where Anne (Pebbles) caught the first & only fish of the trip, an impressive Yellow Belly, which was duly cooked on the campfire that night for all to enjoy.

A lovely spot, but this was our coldest night (-3 deg C), with mist on the river & a heavy frost on the vehicles & the ground in the morning. One ingenious person tied plastic bags over her shoes to keep free of mud & Bas found a dead Water Rat in his Yabby net; quite a pretty animal, poor thing. There is plenty of bird life here on the river amongst the gum trees, with hundreds of Swallows nesting under the bridge.

[DDBB jackpots again.]

### **Saturday 8th – Monday 10th August**

Saturday's run is relatively short due west to a bush camp just outside Quilpie, at Lake Houdraman. This is a very special place, which more than challenges Bollon for 'the best' of the bush camps that we have so far experienced on this trip.

As the name 'lake' suggests, we are camped on the shore of a large fresh water lake (one of a string of large lakes through this region) & equipped with our own showers, toilets & generator sets we are more than comfortable in this quiet & remote spot.

Here the dawn light is florescent across the water & the sunsets are just beautiful.

We settled in for an extended stay, more than happy to wait here for Ros & Dennis & Doc to catch up with the group.

Erecting the tents (shower & Loo) gave the girls a giggle. The two-room shower tent took four men and the single room toilet tent took six. The problem here, the girls were told, was that the tents had been packed incorrectly. Yeah right. Techno also had a few problems with his generator, so always ready for a challenge, the men took it apart for servicing. How many men did it take? Don't ask!

The local town of Quilpie is just lovely – life size cut-outs of cattle & a stockman down the centre of the main street, two supermarkets, a wonderful bakery (frequented often) & some really interesting Opal shops. The area is notable for 'rock Opal', so fossicking was high on the agenda.

All our 'nickname's' are now firmly established – 'Lady Latch' (Coral) earned hers for locking her husband Yoda inside the caravan with a full bladder. (Engaged the outside latch.) It was suggested by some that this was a deliberate act, but Lady Latch is way too much of a LADY for that to be true!

Stainless again weaved his magic with the camp ovens & we all dined sumptuously.

Conversation around the fire centred on Andy's safe return from space, with a suggestion that possibly a new line of confection called 'Andy Crisps' might be in order.

Basil, Colin & Garry make us all laugh around the campfire with their banter.

Thanks guys, you are real good company!

### **Tuesday 11th August**

Basil & Colin moved on ahead to recce accommodation around Emerald for us, as with the 'Gem Festival' on there at the time we would arrive, it is very busy throughout the whole region. And besides, they had some mates to catch up with along the way.

We were woken 'early' by their departure with a loud rendition of "Who let the dogs out". They circled the camp 'three times' just to make sure we all got the message.

We stayed an extra day here at Lake Houdraman to give Ros & Dennis some recovery time after their marathon drive. Technos' gen-set waxes & wanes, fossicking continues & the spectacular light on & over the lake at dusk keep us enthralled.

Shopping in Quilpie has been wonderful & Imelda has certainly lived up to her name. Bolder Opal has been a real turn on for most of us (Pebbles has got the GEM BUG real bad.) and the quest for that elusive bit of colour continues unabated. Fortunately for others, the Opal shops sell lovely pieces, which when at home, may or may not be claimed as a personal find.

Wonder if Andy is down yet!

## Thursday 13th August

Departed the lake & Quilpie @ 9.30am, but not without another stop at the bakery.

Next stop? Only our intrepid leaders' know (maybe) & they are just not saying, but heading northwest. The DDBB kitty is well worth winning at this point in the trip.

[Those who hastily nominated Windorah today could have been a bit premature.]

Onto another 'narrow' QLD road, having to move off onto the dirt to let the trucks pass. Lots of white, mauve, yellow & pink wildflowers lining the red earth roadside along here to an early afternoon stop at our most westerly point of the trip - Windorah.

This is a classic QLD outback town with guys in 'ten gallon hats' sitting on the front porch of the general store, 'mustering' helicopters parked in the rear yard & a very interesting pub with a fine array of hats, boots & sundry 'outback/cattle' gear.

The only fuel pump open when we arrive is at the general store, so with seven vehicles lined up we know we are in for a bit of a wait. Fortunately, either the word went out or we got lucky with the rhythm of the place, the servo opened, which was run by a blind man (who looked very ill) & a rather masculine looking lady. The blind man, following his partners' cues, very accurately gave the correct change for every transaction from designated drawers. Most impressive teamwork!

Once again we are all tricked, as Windorah becomes a fuel stop only & we double back to finally camp on the banks of the magnificent Cooper Creek. This is a very beautiful & popular spot with lots of bird life, but unfortunately no fish for those who cast a line - the Pelicans have probably harvested them all! The good news is that Andy is down safely. (There goes the 'crisp' business!)

[DDBB jackpots again!]

## Thursday 14th August

One male person had to be coaxed out of bed today (well it wasn't 1500 yet) with the threat of Mum & Loo Loo going into his van to rouse him. This threat was most effective.

Travelling generally NE on the Thomson Developmental Road today through 'Channel Country' on a lovely day with the promise of later heat. Whilst the recent rain has produced a green carpet of grass throughout this remote area, the recent drought is clearly evident in the stunted trees & the recent regrowth. This gives the landscape all around two clearly marked parallel horizontal lines of old & new. Fascinating.

We cross a ridge of high ground (great views) & are presented with broad 'savannah' country to the horizon. With the wind increasing under a threatening sky (which fortunately doesn't come to anything) we ply the narrow road across the plain.

Along here two Brolgas' are (excitedly) spotted by Pebbles doing their mating dance just a few metres from the road. What a thrill this was. The digi-cam ran hot.

No convenient bushes or trees along here, so 'twixt & tweens' are required for any (many) wee stops. [You know what I mean!]

Arrived and settled into the Longreach 'Gunnadoo Caravan Park' around 3.30pm.

Many loads of laundry were processed. Dinner that night at the local RSL was excellent & everyone retired early, tired from the concentration required to negotiate the days narrow & remote QLD roads.

[DDBB – Jackpot – too easy, no contest. All guess - by consensus all reinvest.]

## **Friday 15th August**

Most spent the day visiting the local Longreach attractions such as the Qantas Museum & the Stockman's Hall of Fame, which are both well worth the admission, while others did some shopping in this large & well serviced regional town. Pretty much anything you desire can be found here, including both 'boy' & 'girl' stuff.

Excellent bakery too!

Late in the day, Lady Latch, Imelda, Ros & Mum conned JB into taking them 'girl shopping' at the 'Opal Shop' in town. Serves him right, he probably flapped his gums about how great the rings were. Don't know why, just suspect he enjoyed it too.

Another of life's mysteries is where we are headed next, for tomorrow we move on.

## **Saturday 16th August**

Today we are heading due east. The destination could be Emerald, Anakie, Sapphire or Rubyvale. We all recon we've got this one & the DDBB jackpot is up for grabs.

Along the way we visit some truly fascinating QLD towns.

Ifracombe, with approximately a kilometre of the main street (much to Doc's delight) lined with vintage agricultural machinery.

Barcaldine for morning tea, the home of the 'tree of knowledge' marking the foundation of the Australian Labour Party &, arguably, the best bakery of the whole trip.

Jericho, with an arty park representing Joshua's pipes & 'the biblical' battle of Jericho, a wonderful old pub with 'hitching rails' out the front for horses & (yes) a drive in theatre.

Near Willows, we hear Peter (farmer) on the radio. He & Stretch (& partners) are camped out near Willows Gemfield & finding 'good stuff'. This is enough information for Doc, he turns around & is off to join them.

We arrive at our destination late in the afternoon & camp behind the Anakie Gemfields RSL in 'Sapphire'. Who could have guessed that?

Therefore we say, due to much 'misinformation', we suspect deliberately canvassed by our leaders, the jackpot is once again safe from predators. Bummer!

At least the good news is that this is a comfortable green grassy spot, with the vans on one side of the hall & the campervans & tents on the other (the area known as 'carnival corner' – they had way to much fun over there) with the fireplace in the middle.

Most importantly, we are again reunited with Basil & Colin.

Stay tuned for Part 2