

# ALBERT NAMATJIRA

## Our Great Aboriginal Painter

By Frank Clune

I first met Albert Namatjira at Alice Springs, Central Australia, in 1935, when prowling the ranges in search of Lasseter's reef of gold.

At that time Namatjira was working as a camelier to Rex Battarbee, a Victorian artist. Rex had been severely wounded at Bullecourt, France, in World War One, but later recovered, except that his left hand was injured.

He studied as an artist, then he toured the outback in search of subjects for his canvas, during which he won the Centennial Prize in 1934 for a water-colour of the Macdonnell Ranges in Central Australia.



Travelling around the sandhills in Central Australia, before the invention of jeeps and four-wheel drives, was done by camels. It was at Hermannsburg Lutheran Mission, 80 miles from Alice Springs, on the Finke River, that Rex Battarbee made his headquarters.

Here he met Namatjira, a full-blood Arunta native, born on the mission in 1902. The tribal name "Namatjira" means "Flying Ant", the title of his father's totem.

While still young, Albert had married Rubena, also full-blood, and they have five sons and three daughters.

Three of the sons, Enos, Ewald and Oskar, are following in their father's footsteps, painting landscapes in vivid water-colours, but in different styles from the work of their father.

Albert Namatjira was reared on the Mission, and learned to speak English besides his native Arunta. He got a job on the Mission, driving a four-horse waggon team, and doing general labour, as a shearer, blacksmith and carpenter.

Later Albert went on a walkabout to Alice Springs, where he worked for an Afghan contractor, carting cement.

Tiring of civilisation, Albert returned to the Mission, where as a hobby he began working with hot wires, burning totem signs in boomerangs, which were sold to tourists.

Fate intervened when Rex Battarbee happened along, and gave Albert a job looking after the three camels. The Arunta native had never seen a painting in his life, and was fascinated by the painted hills, mountains, trees and sandy creeks.

When Rex saw that Albert was interested in his work, he gave him paper and brushes, and told him to try his luck. Never did he give him any lessons.



Albert told me that after Battarbee went away, he painted a couple of pictures "but they were horrible". A year later Battarbee returned and took Albert and the camels on a walkabout to Red Bank Gorge, thirty miles from Hermannsburg.

Albert was fascinated with the glorious red rocks, and Ghost Gums of vivid white, and the age-old palms and tree ferns. He painted them exactly as he saw them.

The result so delighted the white artist that he showed the black man the correct way of mixing the paints and applying them to the paper.

So Albert's art-knowledge was born. From Red Bank Gorge he went alone west to the Haast Bluff, a huge outcrop named in 1872 by explorer Ernest Giles after the New Zealand Geologist, Julius von Haast.

Albert chose to paint the dark blue Bluff when it was drenched with sunshine.



The result, a masterpiece, was purchased by the Trustees of the Adelaide Art Gallery in 1939. Ever since, paintings by the Aboriginal artist have been in great demand, and are prized by collectors all over the world.

In June, 1953, I arrived at Alice Springs, in search of Albert Namatjira. My ambition was to get him to paint a water-colour of Haast's Bluff for me.

With Enos Namatjira, Albert's eldest son, as my guide, we set out on a journey west of Alice Springs, in search of his father, who was on walkabout somewhere in the Macdonnell Ranges.