

POLICE TRACKERS

A Fast Vanishing Race

THE Aboriginal Police Tracker is a fast-vanishing race, and *Dawn* would like to place on record, some of the exploits of this fine body of men.

Ex-Police Sgt. Tracker, Alec Riley, now living in retirement at Dubbo, has a most interesting book of newspaper clippings from which a series of articles will be written.

Dawn would be glad to publish information concerning any other tracker or ex-tracker, and invites letters of interest from any such.

The following appeared in a Sunday newspaper in February, 1950 :—

“If a spider walked across a pane of glass, an Australian blacktracker could follow its footsteps.”

That is the tribute one of Australia's leading detectives pays to the most unusual body of police workers in the world—the aboriginal police trackers. These little known bush sleuths who combine the talents of Sherlock Holmes and a bloodhound, make it virtually impossible for anyone to disappear anywhere in the globe's most sparsely settled continent.

Although Australia's scientific criminal detection force is second to none, these human police dogs, who are only a few years removed from boomerang-throwing savages, play an indispensable role in policing 2,974,581 square miles of country so wild that much of it has never been explored. Every year they hunt down hundreds of lost persons, fugitive criminals and escaped convicts in terrain which travel writers traditionally describe as “trackless waste”.

This unique mixture of primitive bush knowledge and modern sleuthing is one of the most exciting chapters in world police annals.

The ability of Australia's aborigines in tracking is no accident. On the contrary, it is a natural product of the inhospitable Australian environment. For many centuries, this isolated continent has been a grim, difficult place in which to live. Semi-arid in most areas, it supports only a strange and sparse animal life which even today, is sharply distinct from that elsewhere in the world. Kangaroos, emus, wallabies, wombats, koalas, giant lizards, snakes, and even the rare platypus are wary in habit and rapid in flight.

To exist in such an environment, dark-skinned bushmen who inhabited the country before the advent of the white man developed few of the artificial aids which helped natives in more hospitable lands to live by hunting. The Australian bushmen never possessed the bow and arrow which most primitive people used. Instead, they were forced to rely on the boomerang, spears and crude throwing sticks to bring down their quarry.

With the double handicap of elusive game and poor weapons, the “Abos,” as they are called in Aussie slang, were forced to evolve some method of hunting to compensate for these factors. In the absence of abundant buffalo herds such as American Indians hunted with ease, and the plentiful quarry of the African natives, the Australian bushmen concentrated on successful stalking of individual animals.

The schooling of the aboriginal hunter began almost from infancy. Children's games all concern tracking. Virtual babes are still taught games involving the tracking of insects and small lizards across the sand. Their reward is the privilege of eating their captured prizes. Later, they accompany the men of the tribe on hunts, learning to read the story of the bush from tiny signs which others would either ignore or miss entirely.

Students of aboriginal life assert that the real secret of the “Abos'” superlative tracking ability is an intimate knowledge of bush life plus an extraordinarily well-trained power of observation.

A classical sage of blacktracker detective work occurred some years ago in Queensland, then the scene of a hectic gold rush reminiscent of the forty-niner days of California.

In stark desert country where each man carried his own law in his holster, consignments of gold were regularly escorted from the mining camp to the bank at Rockhampton by mounted police troopers. After delivering the gold, the constables returned with the cash for the owners.