
The most beautiful lady . . .

Early in October, I took a trip to the land of never hurry, never worry—Wilcannia in N.S.W. About one hundred miles before you get to the town, the landscape changes a great deal. And so does the feeling the land gives you. You can sense the majesty of the semi-desert and begin to understand why the people of these parts have different ideas and different values from your own. After a while, you get a little envious. After a bit longer, you don't want to go home.

But let me tell it from the beginning. A friend, Mrs Carmel Power, Andrew, my big matey mong and I were travelling to Wilcannia to "do" it for NEW DAWN. Carmel came along purely to keep me company, because she likes people and because she had never seen the country out west. Andrew came because he's beaut company and because he gets too lonely and miserable if I'm away for a long time. Knowing what an embarrassing time Aborigines can give strangers, I had come armed with a few names and addresses, but still didn't exactly look forward to breaking down the reserve on the reserve. When people get shy, I get shy too and then, oh boy!

What we wanted to do was stay on the reserve and get to know at least some of the people in the short time we had in Wilcannia. Would the reserve people agree to this? We had a message from Sydney for Mrs Elsie Jones, who lives on the reserve, so we set out to find her, pass on the message and ask about staying on the place. Mrs Jones, whom we found by the nearby Darling river, fishing, said "OK". We had our own bedding with us, but not much else, but Mrs Jones' hospitality was to make this no problem. Her friendliness, entirely natural, was so complete that we felt at home at once. Why, she even let us forget we were gubbas! That night, we all had a fish dinner at her house and yarned all evening.

Elsie Jones has lived in the Wilcannia area all her life and is the daughter of a fullblood Aboriginal woman and a Scots father. Elsie, who is now a widow, settled on the reserve fifteen years ago. When she came there, the house and ground were completely bare. The house had not even a stove in those days, just bare walls and a wooden floor. The yard was brick-hard clay-pan earth which would grow almost nothing. Elsie and her husband set to work to turn these unpromising beginnings



into a home. They carried soil from two miles away for the fruit trees they were determined to plant. They got a 44-gallon-drum full of river water and got it home on an old 1927 Dodge truck. Their little fruit trees grew and in time, the fruit came. Said Elsie: "It was always a problem. I used to share the fruit with everybody, like what was right, but often the kids would strip the trees before the fruit was ripe".

Her tribe? The Darling River people—the Barkindji tribe who had once ruled this area. As we helped to clean and prepare the fish, Carmel asked Mrs Jones whether she knew much of the Barkindji language. Came the soft reply, full of fine pride: "Yes, I know my language." My language. Out tumbled the sounds that don't exist in English. Clumsily, I got some of them down and had to ask her to repeat them, over and over, to get the words even a little bit right. Here are some of them:

- kunbali —a yellow-belly or perch.
- bandoo —Murray cod.
- bangala —black bream.
- yammedja —cat-fish.
- bandja } —two sorts of bony bream in the
- naamba } Darling River.