ROAD MAKERS OF THE NORTH WEST

Leigh Edmonds

Introduction

Western Australia is the nation's largest state, occupying a third of the continent. Like much of the Australian continent it is barren, by white standards at any rate. In comparison to European or North American experience, it is not only vast, it is unpopulated. In 1993 a Dutch friend and I were driving through the back blocks of Alabama. Everywhere you looked were the signs of cultivation and habitation and I was thinking how many people lived on the land there. I was about to comment to him that a lot of people lived there when he turned to me and said, 'Not many people live here.' Which tells you how subjective the idea of population density is. These days near enough to three million people live in Western Australia, but they live mostly in the south west corner of the state. North of the Tropic Capricorn the total population would be numbered in the low thousands.

This paper is about the construction of roads and the people who made them in such a vast and remote land. In 1993 I was commissioned to research and write a history of Main Roads Western Australia and as part of that process I had the opportunity to travel briefly in the North West and to meet the people working on the roads there. As part of my further research I also had the opportunity to interview many men who had spent years working on the roads in the North West and to hear from them some of their stories. Even as late as the 1980s road making in the North West could be truly a pioneering experience. Perhaps the equipment they used then was larger, more complex and more productive than it had been in the previous three decades, but the people who did the work were usually not improving on existing tracks or roads, they were making new roads to a metropolitan standard thousands of kilometres from the nearest traffic lights.

(I hasten to add that Main Roads was doing just as much work, much of it pioneering, in the southern but remote areas of the state. Construction of the sealed Eyre Highway eastwards from the goldfields was itself an massive undertaking, as was the construction of roads between remote goldfields towns and links with the coast far to the south. However, there is something epic about the North-West and the remembrances and stories told about it are on the same scale. The region grips your imagination and the stories of work done there also plays on that imagination.)

The title of this paper is something of a self-indulgence. After I'd completed *The Vital Link* I promised myself that if I ever had the opportunity I'd make use of all the oral history I'd collected to compile a book titled 'Road Makers of the North West'. A decade later I haven't had the chance but I'd still love to use the title, so here it is. There is, however a more serious idea underlying its use and that is, quite simply, as a starting point for consideration of the state of the history and heritage of our roads. A large compilation of oral histories published by the VicRoads Retirees Association in 1995 tells stories about road making and maintenance across Victoria. It is a much more compact area but even so the sense of isolation, pioneering and innovative road making comes through as strongly as it did in Western Australia.

What this paper does, then, is to tell some of the stories about road making in the North West. In concluding it reflects on the fact that although roads in Australia are some of the nation's largest structures and most impressive engineering achievements, they are taken so much for granted that people use them to visit 'heritage places' having an understanding of the history and heritage of the roads themselves.

Some stories from the North West.

The North West is a general term that can be used to describe the coastal region of Western Australia north of the Tropic of Capricorn. In the 1920s the Western Australian government created a Department of the North West to co-ordinate all government activities in the area but it did not last long. Perhaps that was because although the area is vast there was little more than pastoralism happening there. There were roads of a sort, perhaps more like tracks and often barely that. Most travelling in the north west occurred on the coastal shipping service and, from the 1920s, regular air services and charter flying services.

In 1940 Main Roads put Ron Duncan, an assistant engineer, in charge of all roads in the north west. He had one major works gang for the entire region as well as a few smaller teams. To get around he had utitilites, serviced and loaded with everything necessary to work in very remote areas, waiting at the major aerodromes in the region. He could fly in, make an inspection tour of the district and then fly out again. This practice continued into the 1960s at least and ever since Main Roads has made extensive use of aviation to get around the region quickly and efficiently because it is so large.

In the 1950s a young engineer, Don Aitken, was sent up to fill in for Duncan when his health began to fail. When Duncan had to leave the region in 1959 due to ill health another engineer, Tom Pedersen, replaced him. In May 1960 the region was divided into two, the Kimberly Division in the north where Albert Tongolini was the Divisional Engineer and the Carnarvon Division headed by Pedersen. The pace of roadworks picked up through the 1960s and a new District, the Pilbara Division, was created from the top of the old Carnarvon Divisiont, and Mick Lendich was its first Divisional Engineer.

Let's start with Albert Tognolini's description of a section of the Great Northern Highway in the Kimberley District when he started there:

> *Between Broom and Yeeda the road ran in places through some fairly sandy country. It was only cleared to about 18 to 20 feet wide. In places there were two deep wheel tracks, and when you came across an approaching vehicle you had some difficulty getting out of the tracks. Long sections of the road had a light gravelling but it would punch through quite readily, so you could get some fairly deep sand holes at times. That was always a source of complaint from the road train operators.*
>
> *The road crossed over the Fitzroy River near Yeeda on a low level timber bridge which was approaching the end of its life. It had been there since the 1930s and obviously at some stage it would have to be rebuilt. Between Yeeda and Fitzroy Crossing the country was better as far as road-making went, but in the dry season you would get dust holes. And after rain there would be scours cut across the road where the water had run across it. You had to be careful and watch out for these scours because they could cause serious damage to tyres and wheel rims. The biggest hazard was flood crossings. They would stop people from travelling when they got washed out or the water was too deep to cross. During periods of rain there were clay sections of road which you just couldn't traverse because they hadn't been gravelled.*

As many of you will know, apart from some special material such as bitumen, road makers try to economise by making roads from local materials. In the north west, where much of the potential road making material is very poor quality, Main Roads workers became especially proud of their ability to make good roads out of materials others found unworkable. This story, told by Geoff Wright, comes from the period when contractors were beginning to do major construction work on Western Australian roads.

> *Fred Seiler did about thirty years up here on the roads. He was pretty well*

known because he could build a road anywhere with naturally occurring materials. All these blokes like Fred had the respect of their men because of their ability, and it was very important to them that they could always demonstrate that they were a cut above the rest in terms of their skills in building roads.

The classic case was out the other side of Fitzroy Crossing where the contractor challenged Main Roads that the reason they couldn't meet the specification was because the materials we were providing under the contract were making it impossible to work. They challenged Main Roads to do it. Contractually that represented a hell of a threat because if we couldn't do it we could have got a rather large claim against us. Main Roads got Bob Shaw to see what he could do and Bob said, 'No worries, I'll get Fred Seiler'. They took Fred out there and Fred got the plant and other equipment he needed and the boniest material they could bring out onto the road, not the best material out of the pit. Fred said, 'Right, do this, do this and this', and they were around with notepads and cameras because they were getting our work method by challenging us. Even with the rubbish, Fred got it right and right first time and that shot the contractor in the foot. Fred walked away with a nice half smile on his face. He didn't have to say much.

One of the reasons Main Roads developed such skill with the materials at hand was because of the dedication of its staff. Road making wasn't just a job with them, to many it was an obsession. Of course, in the 1960s the government's purse strings were not as tight as they later became and so there was scope for experimentation and learning on the job. Even so, in such vast lands, even this was a big undertaking. Here Mick Lendich recalls one of his first experiences in seeing the road workers of the North West in action in 1964.

I was on a familiarisation trip in the Pilbara region with the Divisional Engineer, Tom Pedersen, engineer Brian Winchcombe and supervisor Ron Jones. Temperatures in the area were in the high 40s and neither the vehicle nor the accommodation were air-conditioned. Near Roy Hill Station we inspected a recently completed job involving some 15 or 20 miles of upgrading works on the Great Northern Highway. The work included construction of many floodways and leve banks to divert flood water after heavy rain. We saw a lot of damage had occurred as a result of 4 or 5 inches of rain falling in a very short period a few days earlier. Tom was not very happy with this, and felt that the work could have been done differently. So he decided to bring back the supervising people who were involved with the job for an on-site inspection and discussion. We drove from Roy Hill to Port Hedland, about three hundred miles, and arrived on Friday night. After locating the foreman - who was on a job 60 miles away - and the senior foreman, we all drove back to Roy Hill the following morning, arriving that night and sleeping in the open. Tom held an on-the-job training course on Sunday morning, where we examined the job in some detail. We discussed what might have minimised the damage that had occurred. Then we drove back to Port Hedland on Sunday evening.

I was amazed at the way Tom had been able to arrange and hold this inspection and training course on the weekend, without notice. All involved had participated without any apparent discontent or expression of concert that they would have to do so out of work hours. This was an example to me of how different life in the north would be and how an enthusiastic Divisional Engineer could get the most out of his staff.

These stories just begin to give a hint of what the road makers of the north west did and how they did it. There are, however, other aspects to their stories that are just as important because they are about the people who did the work and the people who lived with them. In such

a vast area as the North West is was impossible for people go home after their day's work and so the workers lived in camps close to the work. In areas further south it was possible for workers to drive home at night or at least stay in camps during the week and then go home on the weekends. In the north west none of that was possible and so whole families lived in camps out in the wilderness, endless miles from the nearest towns. Here Jeff Capper recalls what happened when a new worker arrived on the job in the 1950s. This camp was at the 37 mile peg out from Derby

What usually used to happen when anybody new arrived in the place, if some of the boys were in camp on the Sunday and there was nothing to do and there were married families, they all mucked in and gave them a hand to set up camp. When they first arrived just so that they were comfortable during the night, tents were usually erected in a square.

Once they started to progress, say after a week or so, the next weekend everybody would get over there - some of these single blokes from the camp and the married fellows - and we'd put down a concrete slab that could be anything up to 8 feet by 8 feet and it was usually the eating area for the family. In those days they had the small corrugated iron sheds and one of these was set up as a kitchen. There was usually a wood stove - it was packed in mud and set up there. Stan McKinley and his wife had a tent of their own, the three girls were set up in a tent of their own, the older son had a tent of his own and the younger lads, they had a tent of their own to sleep in. These were set up around the concrete square. Then we put up poles and built a brush roof over the concrete square. It was usually made out of wire and spinifex or whatever else was available. This was done by everybody in the camp to make it as comfortable as possible for the people.

This remote world was also a dangerous place and even though the flying doctor service has started there in the 1930s, there were still a myriad of ways in which people could be injured or killed. And if they were injured it was no easy matter to get them to a doctor or hospital. One man who suffered terrible burns in an accident had to be driven in the back of a ute over 150 miles overnight to a hospital before he could be flown down to Perth. In another case, recounted by Ralph Moore, the accident was much more serious. Here Main Roads was putting in new roads for the town of Exmouth that was built in association with the US naval facility being built there.

Soon after I arrived in the Carnarvon Division in 1964 Tom Pederson introduced two-way radio - the old Trager two-way radio. In those days it required a telescopic aluminium aerial, which was probably fifteen feet tall, with a wooden base. Every time you wanted to transmit you had to erect this aerial. We'd had the radios going at Exmouth where we'd been doing work for a while. Along with the development of the radio system, the SEC were putting in electrical reticulation. They'd strung up a lot of wires and put in an 11,000 volt line on Maidstone Crescent, which was the main focuse of the Civic Centre for the town site. Our chaps were used to seeing all his construction.

One morning I was in Carnarvon calling the group on the radio. There was Supervisor Bill Marvin, Bruce Keillor, who was the foreman, and Jimmy Smitt, who was the surveyor. Calling, calling. Nothing. No answer. It wasn't until around lunch time that I got a call from Keith Deville, who was the truck driver on the job. He'd gone to the US naval base, which was also under construction, to use their radio system to call our office to report that there had been a fatal accident.

I think it was Bruce who'd been trying to put up the aerial, and it touched the 11,000 volt line. It had been turned on either that morning or the day before, and

they didn't know about it. When the aerial touched the line Bruce, a young family man, and Jimmy Smitt, who was single, were killed. Bill Marvin, the older person - at that time he was in his early 50s - was saved. We don't know why, because he had burn holes through his boots where the electricity arced from his body through his boots to the ground.

I saw Bill get off the plane five days later and he was still as white as a ghost from the shock that he'd received, both the mental and the electrical shock. He said, "Why me' Why was I saved and the younger blokes weren't?' Exmouth has some important, exciting and satisfying professional memories for me, but it also has a very personal sad memory.

It is, perhaps, easy to forget that there is more to making roads than the process of construction alone. In an organisation like Main Roads there were also scores of people working behind the scenes to make everything happen. In the camps there were the cooks (and the stories about cooks are something else) as well as those working in the offices, doing the paperwork, drawing the plans, testing materials in the laboratory and working out the pays. As an ex-clerk, I'm always interested to find out about their lives. Maxine McGillvray recalls that working in the office could be an adventure, or at least a trial, too

The working accommodation when I started in Port Hedland in the early 1970s was an old transportable over in the Depot. It had only very small windows and it was very dark, so you had to have the lights on all the time to be able to see your work. The airconditioning had to work all year round because the windows weren't big enough to let any air in.

When Cyclone Joan came through in December 1975 we had no electricity for ten days, so there was no airconditioning and no fans. You just couldn't get any air into the office. We were so hot it was unbelievable. Because we had no power we couldn't transmit our wages data through to Perth by telex, and all the pays had to be done manually. We had to sit in the office until midnight or one in the morning with hurricane lamps, and the heat of those lamps, plus the heat and the humidity of December was amazing. We just sat there hour after hour doing all these manual calculation to work out everybody's pay. The paper stuck to your hands and every time you moved you were stuck to things. The hurricane lamps were attracting all the wogs into the office and you had little ants crawling all over you while you were trying to work. They would even try to crawl into your mouth while you were talking to someone. But you did the job - you had to do it.

Nowadays I don't think anyone would put up with those conditions, but in those days everyone said, 'Okay, it has to be done so we'll do it'. The atmosphere was actually like a party because we were working in such extreme conditions. It was a bit on the brink of hysteria, with everyone laughing a bit too loud and a bit too much because everything around you was ridiculous.

Before concluding these stories there are two other things that are important in understanding the culture of the Main Roads people who worked in the north west. The first, as Geoff Wright recalls, is beer

If there wasn't beer there wouldn't be any roads in the whole north of Australia. The best performance indicator you could have would be kilometres of roads versus the number of men that were in the gang that built it and how many gallons of beer they drank. If you added up all the blokes and all the weeks they camped out, it would be an awful lot of beer. I don't think I've seen very many blokes over the years in the camps that didn't like a beer. I'm not saying they're all fall-down drunk types but they come home, they're dehydrated at the end of the day so

they have a few beers, they have their tea, then they have a few more beers and go to bed reasonably early. That's their routine.

Alcoholism used to be a problem in the past when the turnover for staff in these northern areas was high. Kununurra was where people would run out of dollars on a trip around Australia, so they'd start and give notice the same day to get a week's pay so they had enough to get them on. Because of that high turnover, we couldn't be choosy about who we gave jobs to. I can recall one or two rather famous alcoholics that we had, and they were bloody disruptive. A menace. The other blokes didn't like then much. Now that our gangs are getting a lot smaller we have to do more with less, and the blokes basically won't tolerate anyone who doesn't pull their weight, and your true alcoholics can't pull their weight.

There's one final thing to remember about the road builders of the north west, that they were men. Road making was, and is still largely, the domain of men. This created its own masculine world that was hard for women to enter. Maxine McGillvray experienced this first hand, and she also experienced the beginning of change:

I remember one particular manager saying 'Females in Main Roads are only temporary employees because they all eventually leave and have children'. So he thought I was only a temporary employee. Out in the field the guys were very guarded and you had to gradually chip away at them to win them over. Once they started to open up, that was a real reward, and I felt honoured to be included in their story-telling or to be given a letter to post in town to a loved one. You get satisfaction over little things. One Christmas my staff gave me a cup, and it says, 'The best man for the job is a woman', which showed me they were very happy with how I was going.

I can remember when I was made Divisional Clerk. Barry Clark was the Divisional Engineer at the time. He didn't just tell me; he came down and put the loudspeaker system on for the whole building to hear, and then announced it. That was a thrill. He was very proud that the first women ever to become Divisional Clerk came from his Division.

The history and heritage of roads

What relevance do these stories, and hundreds of others like them, have to heritage? The stories I was fortunate enough to collect about how the roads were made and people who made them shows that roads have a rich history. The fact that there are a number of books written about the history of road making in Australia also supports that contention. But, of course, history is not heritage.

Is there a heritage of roads in Australia? A look at any of the heritage data bases will throw up countless structures from huts to cathedrals, hundreds of bridges and many industrial structures. But roads? It is hard to tell because the date base search engines I used would not allow me to identify a road as places. A road or street was merely part of the address of a place such as a house, as far as those data bases were concerned. So, if there is to be a heritage of roads, how is it to be achieved? It seems to me that there are two problems to consider.

The first is that roads are not really places, at least not as far as the public and most heritage practitioners are concerned. They are what we use when we want to get to heritage places. You don't go to the Great Northern Highway the same way you'd go to the Roundhouse in Fremantle. You go along the Great Northern Highway as part of your trip to see the Roundhouse. There may parts of roads that are considered places, such as bridges, and there might be other parts such as major earthworks that could be considered heritage, but generally

speaking roads and earthworks are there simply to support the road and so they are places you pass while driving along the road. The best roads are the ones that are smooth and well graded so the motorist doesn't notice them. This means they are designed and constructed so they don't intrude onto the driver's consciousness with the result that any history they might have is buried in the finished product of the road makers.

One of my favourite examples of this is the Munjina Gorge on the Great Northern Highway between Newman and Port Hedland. It is the access point between the Hammersley Ranges and the coastal plain with the road running down into the gorge on a fairly gently graded road. Main Roads constructed a look-out at the top of the gorge for those who care to turn off to have a look, but it is rarely used. The road itself climbs and curves gently so it is barely noticeable to people in a car but to achieve that gentle alignment massive earthworks had to be done and, to preserve the ecology of the gorge, even more extensive works on waterways and other features were necessary. To the people who were involved in constructing that section of the road it was of the high points of their career, but to the motorist their success of the art is that it is unnoticeable.

In Perth another such example of roadworks is the Narrows Interchange, used by millions of people a year. Anyone who has been to Perth and looked out from Kings Park to the city has seen the interchange because it is a major part of the large area of parkland between the lookout and the city. Again, the point of the interchange is to carry traffic and to be as unobtrusive as possible so it is usually overlooked - literally - by sightseers going to see that unique view of the city.

It also strikes me that the Great Northern Highway is probably the biggest single constructed structure in Western Australia, and perhaps the whole of Australia. Yet, because it is perceived only as a strip of black running to the horizon, the engineering achievement that went into it over decades, spanning the whole careers of engineers and workers, is barely comprehensible. Perhaps it is that the sheer size and scope of the thing is almost too big to grasp.

Because of the size of roads is may be inappropriate or impossible to grasp them as heritage places. A cultural heritage place, even one like the Sydney Opera House, is something you can take in at a glance and understand that the details that make it up are bounded in one comprehensible idea. On the other hand, although most roads are relatively simple structures, their size makes them hard to grasp.

The second reason is that although roads have a history it is difficult to present an interpretation to turn them into heritage places. Heritage places are set aside from other places through the process of heritage identification and classification, that is the result of a process of research and justification of a decision to confer heritage status on a place. In the documentation of a heritage decision a history is included as part of the explanation of the place. Often heritage places have plaques and perhaps other forms of placarding to help interpret them to visitors as places of heritage significance. Recently I've been commissioned to write a couple of short histories of prisons that are being closed. These little books will be made available to the public as part of the process of turning places where people have been imprisoned into heritage places.

How can we, is it even possible to placard roads and to provide interpretation that could help road users understand the heritage of roads? Not with our current technology, at least. In fact, doing that kind of thing could be considered a road safety hazard. So, for most road users, roads remain tools of everyday life and not heritage places.

What about the grey nomads who take to their caravans and undertake that great trek of driving around Australia in their retirement. Most of them have spent their lives in the cities of Australia's south west but have heard stories about the great out-back and want to see it for themselves. They drive in their thousands along Western Australia's Great Northern and North West Coastal Highways, along roads laid out and first constructed by people like Albert

Tognolini, Tom Pedersen, and Mick Lendich. To them the heritage they experience on their trek is not so much in the road itself but in the landscape of which the road is a part. Perhaps here lies some idea about how the heritage of roads, the landscape through which they run and the people who use them might be meshed.