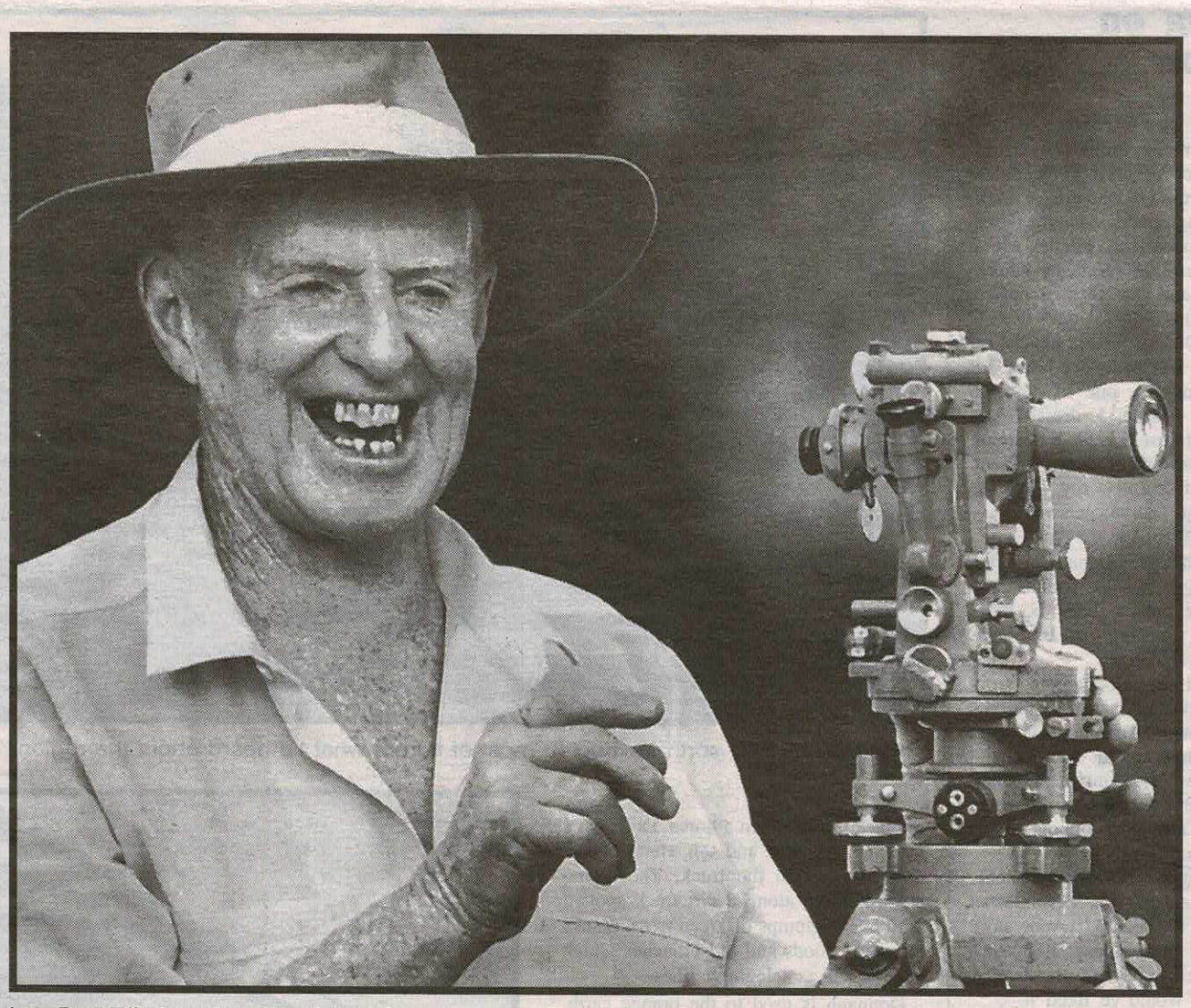

Len Beadell at work in the Outback.

Surveyor Len Beadell, of Salisbury (1923-95), most recent of the great white explorers of Australia and a real bloke, opened up 2.5 million square kilometres of central and western Australia; he also opened up Australia to the nuclear age. Fellow bushie MARK SHEPHARD, author of the definitive book "The Simpson Desert: Natural History and Human Endeavor", has painstakingly assembled the facts of Beadell's life for a new publication, "A Lifetime in the Bush: The Biography of Len Beadell". From the book, here is an example of Beadell's witty, self-deprecating public speaking style.

Exploring with a REAL BLOKE

I WAS standing around a camp fire 30 years ago on a freezing July night in the desert. I casually asked the fellow alongside me if something was troubling him.

He said: "No, why should you think that?"

I replied: "Oh well, it's just that you haven't said anything to anyone since February."

He stated: "Well I haven't got anything to say. Have you?"

I said: "Oh no, I don't suppose so." And I left it at that until October and then I asked him: "Are you sure there is nothing wrong?"

He said: "You're always picking on me."

That incident happened eight years after we drove up the old Stuart Hwy to Alice Springs with our newly formed group of workers that I called the Gunbarrel Road Construction Party. We were on our way to make a network of Outback roads 4000 miles long. (I'll talk in miles and gallons because I don't know what they are in kilopascals). Our aim was to open up over a million square miles of central and western Australia which had hardly been touched by white man.

It all started in 1947, when I was casually asked if I would go and start a rocket range.

I said yes, that I couldn't think of anything better. I'd always wanted to start a rocket range ever since I was four. By the way, what is a rocket range? I asked what they required and I was told "a big area". I said I knew where there was a million square miles of nothing. On inquiring when they wanted this rocket range built, they said: "Straight away. Right now!" I thought: "Good, I won't even have to wait."

So I drove up to Port Augusta with a jeep and a three-ton truck. At that time, I thought the project was going to last a fortnight; I didn't have any idea that it would occupy the rest of my working life for the next 40-odd years. I arrived at the general area where Woomera is now. I had the feeling that I wasn't hemmed in here. I discovered very quickly I could see a bull ant for 10 miles, unless he was lying down, and I thought: "Now what a perfect area to start a rocket range. What a perfect area to start anything!"

The very first thing I did was to select a mountain near my camp which was nine inches higher than the rest of the plains. After climbing to its peak, I found that I could see a lot more of nothing from up there. I didn't even need oxygen. I put in a survey mark and spent a whole week high on the mountain, reading angles to give me a latitude and longitude from which I could start the whole project. Everything I did later in life – Maralinga, Emu and all the roads – was related to this one pinpoint on the surface of the earth.

Whenever you start a rocket range of any sort, you must have a centreline along which the firing of rockets can take place. I chose a point in the middle of the Eighty Mile Beach between Broome and Port Hedland, a thousand-and-a-half miles away to the north-west, and I worked out a bearing across Australia which would become the centreline of fire for the rockets.

I didn't know at the time, but this centreline would govern the future of Central and Western Australia forever; because I was to later open up a network of 4000 miles of access roads to place instrumentation and carry out special surveys.

I picked out a site which would be suitable for a village and did a survey there. This is where the Woomera township is today. After six months of living at Woomera and having the saltbush and gibber plains to myself, people started to come across the horizon with bulldozers and graders. It was beginning to get too crowded for me.

So I left them with their work and went on to examine the country over which the rockets would be passing, up to a distance of 550 miles from Woomera.

I spent two years in the bush, on my own mostly because I could never find anyone to come with me. I would stop every few days and eat a tin of bully beef using my cold chisel as a fork, in between taking star observations and mending six flat tyres a day. A transmitter was installed in the vehicle and, two years later, I got my first message. I thought: "What a handy thing." I was ordered back to headquarters at Salisbury immediately. I thought: "Heavens, what have I done? I haven't upset anyone because I haven't seen anyone." I threw my swag into the jeep and I headed off through the sandhills. It took me a week to get back as far as the Stuart Hwy. When I finally arrived in Adelaide, I was hustled into a little tiny office. Six people were standing there glaring at me. They drew the blinds and soldered the keyholes. The chief scientist said: "We're going to explode an atomic bomb on mainland Australia and we want you to pick out a site." "Is that all," I thought? And I expected it to be something important.

They wanted the chosen site to be "somewhere fairly well out of the way". The centreline of my rocket range traversed some of the most remote country in Australia and so I thought: "If I go 100 miles farther out into the scrub, I'd be getting really well out of the way." That's where I headed and I spent five months searching.

I found an area where the sandhills diminished and the mulga scrub thinned out to open saltbush paddocks. I thought this was a perfect site to explode a bomb.

I was then told that a party of British scientists, led by the most brilliant atomic scientist in the world at the time, Dr (later to become Sir) William Penney, were coming to inspect the bomb site I had selected. I heard the drone of two aeroplanes at 4am. The next morning, we set off for the bomb site. We drove 10 miles on the first day. That's how long it took me to walk back over every sandhill and bring their Land-Rovers across one at a time. They'd never driven anywhere rougher than Piccadilly Circus. Eventually we arrived at the large claypan near the future bomb site. One of the scientists said: "I've noticed something in common with these claypans. As the claypan dries out after rain, the surface always cracks into pentagon shapes." I said: "Oh yes, they've got to crack in pentagons; they must do that." They asked me why. I thought: "Now when these sort of people ask you a question, you've got to answer them straight away."

They used to say to me: "Look here, when do these flies go away?" I would say: "On the 18th of April." And they'd write that down. They were very precise people and so, when they asked me why claypans crack in pentagons, I said: "Well, it's all tied up with the lateral cohesion acting on the surface tension of the colloidal suspension of molecules of laterite." They said: "Oh, we see." I thought: "Thank heavens for that." During the following year, 400 people descended on Emu Claypan. They brought everything needed to build the atomic site, including a 100-foot steel tower. The bomb was to be winched up to the top of the tower and exploded from there. I had to make a new road from the claypan back to the Stuart Hwy because the atom bomb itself had to be brought up by road.

On the morning the bomb was to be exploded, I was instructed to go to the foot of the tower and join up two wires. I wasn't sure about this, so I left my Land-Rover a half an inch away from me and idling at 500,000 revs. I looked up and saw an ominous black atom bomb sitting on the top of the tower. There was a crow perched on top of it and I said to the crow: "If I were you, I'd shift."

I went back to the central control area and stood alongside Sir William Penney when the bomb was exploded. The whole sky lit up with a blinding orange flash and I could feel the heat on the back of my neck. We turned around to see what had happened. There was a sheet of melted sand a half a mile long and the 100-foot steel tower had turned into dust in less than a millionth of a second. I said: "You can't leave anything lying around these days. You turn your back and it's gone!"

❑ ***A Lifetime in the Bush: The Biography of Len Beadell*, by Mark Shepherd. Published by Corkwood Press, North Adelaide. RRP $29.95.**