

THE DOG FENCE IN SA

In the latter half of the 1800s, as farmers and graziers started taking up land on the edges of settled areas raising sheep, the problem of dingo predation on their stock was recognised, simply, that commercial sheep production cannot coexist with dingoes. In the 1890's, in excess of 11,000 sheep were killed by dingoes on one property in nw SA. Similar levels of predation by dingoes on other properties led to their abandonment during this period.

Pastoralists initially responded to the threat, through the Vermin Districts Act 1894, by cooperatively building vermin fences to protect their livestock.

Back then, there were dog proof cells established around individual farms or groups of cooperating properties, keeping them dingo free. Vermin fenced districts were declared throughout the early 20th century but by the end of WW 2, the system was falling into disrepair.

At that time, two influential landowners, Byron McLachlan of Commonwealth Hill Station and Ian McTaggart of Nonning Station in the Gawler Ranges, looked at the outer most boundaries of these fenced districts and saw that a nearly continuous line of fence already existed from the Great Australian Bight to the NSW border. So they lobbied that this one outer fence be maintained to protect the sheep farming regions of SA and in June 1947 the Dog Fence Act came into operation, and this single barrier was born, a fence in SA, now 2200 Kms long.

The Act established a 4 member Board to be appointed by the Governor with the "power and duty" to ensure that the dog fence was properly maintained "and at all times dog-proof". The Board was also given the power to set and collect a rate on land inside the fence (see Map) which was subsidised on a dollar for dollar basis.

Today the Dog Fence Act provides for a Dog Fence Board to manage funds for and audit the maintainance of the fence and has kept abreast of modern technology to provide the state with the most cost effective dog fence. The Board is now managing the fence in close collaboration with pastoralists through local Dog Fence Boards. Each local board employs contractors to ensure that the Fence in their region is upgraded and maintained in dog-proof condition. The construction of the fence has progressed from a full netting fence, to a composite netting and electric fence, to a full electric fence powered by solar panels.

Initially, inspection and patrolling of the fence was done using camels as transport, which was not without its hazards as this account from "Holding The Line" by Leith Yelland illustrates, when Len Burton took off with his first string of camels.

"The camels were all packed and prepared but Rogers told Burton that it would be necessary to tie down all the fry pans and pots or they would fly. The advice was ignored and 300 yards down the track something spooked the camels and they were off in various directions. The flapping pans continued to spook the camels and made sure they covered plenty of territory."

In 1948, camels were abandoned for Fence Inspection purposes in favour of a truck or utility and a Dodge was the first vehicle provided, which Burton later described as the worst vehicle possible for sandhills. Later a Jeep and a series of Landrovers were used.

In those days, the Inspector with an assistant, monitored the condition of the entire length of the fence in SA. He then reported his findings to the Board which relayed the information to the Stations where work was needed to repair damage, for which the Stations received a maintainance subsidy.

The job of the Inspector would have been tedious work and conditions difficult so the turnover rate in Assistants was very high. In the first 2 years of single fence inspection, 24 assistants were engaged and then either resigned or were dismissed.

For example, in 1946, J French was replaced as Camel man because he had Barcoo Rot. In early 1947 an Afghan named Omedilly Moosha resigned after 3 months as winter on the fence was too cold for his rheumatism. Then WW 2 POW Reg Absolom was employed, who Burton described as a "bushman, camel man, mechanic and motor driver" and who should have been perfect for the job, but he too resigned the following year.

In 1971, Donald Byrnes, the brother of Geoff Byrnes who was the first Head teacher in Coober Pedy in 1960, became the Inspector of Fences . Donald had a background in cattle management at Mt Barry and at Mt Willoughby.

Ray Bahr, Shirley's husband filled the role of Fence rider for the Local Dog Fence Boards for the Far West Coast from 1980 to 1985. He would have had to contend with sand drifts which sometimes reduced the height of the fence so you could walk over it. But the biggest problem was damage from wombats. As another patrolman reported, "They could shift a lot of dirt.....The holes were big-they could make the track collapse. I used to doze the holes then come back the next day and they would be open again." The problem was solved with electrifying this section.

In January and February 1975, huge bushfires in the NW of the state severely damaged portions of the fence. An estimated 147 miles of fence were totally destroyed and 1730 posts burnt, much of it on Commonwealth Hill Station.

Today's national Dog Fence is one continuous barrier for 5400 Kms, from the Great Australian Bight in SA to Jandowae near Chinchilla in Queensland, managed by SA, NSW and Qld.

In 2002, James Woodford travelled the entire length of the fence and later wrote the book "The Dog Fence" based on his experiences and research. He accompanied the SA Dog Fence Inspector, Bill Sandow on the first stretch, from where the fence meets the sea on the Nullarbor to Coober Pedy.

Sandow's job required him to spend 26 weeks of the year in the bush, almost always on his own, checking the fence for breaks.

The patrolman based in Ceduna, covers the first 350 Kms, 100kms of which has been revolutionised by electricity, mainly to control wombats. Here the fence is a waist high construction consisting of 4 strands of wire held up by plastic posts and Sandow's job was to check every 8 Kms for the correct voltage of 2000 volts. Apparently 200 volts stops wombats, 800 for dogs and 2000 for roos so no wombat is going to come back for a second dose. 150 Kms from the coast, the wombat fence reverts back to the netting Dog Fence.

Steel jawed dog traps are set at intervals along the fence, the jaws of which are wiped with strychnine-laced grease so that when an animal is caught, it licks its wounds and dies faster. Without the poison a trapped dog can survive for days and often chew its leg off to escape.

The dog fence passes through a 400 Km long stretch of huge sand dunes, some up to 20 metres high and with vegetation changing from spinifex to saltbush. It passes close to Mt Finke, named and climbed by John McDouall Stuart in August 1858, and later by Ernest Giles in April 1875

At the intersection of the Fence and the Trans Australian Railway line, 6 large steel plates are laid down on the ballast between the tracks, 3 covered with thousands of nails and 3 with arrow shaped slices of metal, so the only way a dingo could get inside the fence would be to tightrope walk along the tracks, which a determined dingo probably would do.

The last landmark near the fence before entering Woomera Prohibited Area is Wynbring Rock which Ernest Giles reached in March 1875 thanks to the navigational ability of the Aboriginal member of his party who had travelled to Wynbring as a child, it being an important rock-hole water source.

After crossing the Ghan Railway line and shortly after that the Stuart Hwy, the fence passes through the moon-plains to the north of Coober Pedy and then heads SE towards The Twins and Billa Kallina.

Bill Stretton, a patrolman in the 50's and 60's, is remembered by Wayne Rankin of The Twins, as a true frontiersman. "A tough, short, independent character, he was a fiery red-headed man with a big red beard". Stretton is remembered for, among other things, righting his Land Rover with a fence strainer after he rolled it, and winning a bottle of whiskey in a bet after carrying a rainwater tank on his back."

At Bill Kallina, James Woodford met and travelled with the patrolman, Keith Beelitz who described a condition that patrolmen call "Hole Blindness". All patrolmen have tales of driving past big holes in blissful ignorance, their minds creating meshing where there is none. Beelitz was not paid a wage but a set amount per Km - \$6.50. His total run was 286 Km. Like all SA patrolmen except for the ones employed by station owners to maintain some sections of the fence, Beelitz was a contractor who tendered for his run and supplied his own 4 WD vehicle, tyres, food and communication gear. His contract was simple - keeping his run dog-proof.

The Fence then passes to the north of Roxby Downs, continues on just to the north of Lake Torrens from where it again turns north to intersect with the Old Ghan Railway line and the Oodnadatta Track, then after some more zigzags, the Strezelecki Track. From here it enters the northern section of the Flinders Ranges where both fence and road negotiate difficult, rocky and often precipitous country, passing close to Mt Hopeless. At the nearby Moolawatana Station, more than 900 dingoes were shot, poisoned or

trapped in 1991 when Michael Sheehan, the grazier lost 3000 sheep in 12 months and nearly went bankrupt. They now run cattle.

The fence then skirts Lake Frome, passes through Frome Downs then east to the NSW border from where the Fence is an impressive 2 metres high and owned and run by the NSW Government. Following the border north to Cameron Corner then east to Hamilton Gate, the NSW Border Fence is therefore considerably shorter than either SA's or Qld's and receives more money for its maintenance which shows in the Fence's perfect condition besides having a virtual highway running alongside. Outside the Fence in this area, there would be the highest dingo numbers in Australia, hence the commitment to its maintenance by both graziers and government. The patrolmen here are employed by the NSW Wild Dog Destruction Board and are paid a wage, given a house fitted out for comfortable living and a car. One patrolman who is also a rabbit shooter, shoots dingoes too when he can and takes the scalps to Thargomindah in Qld where he collects a \$10/dog bounty. On one trip he shot 180 wild dogs in 3 days.

In conclusion, some thought must be given to the usefulness of the Fence today as pastoral land use has changed since the Fence was first constructed.

I quote from James Woodford's book, *The Dog Fence*, "In his book *Red Sands Green Heart* John Read asserts that the Dog Fence is a magnificent tribute to our pioneers. Yet its historical importance may well be discounted because of the damage it does to the environment. Read concedes that the job of the fence is to exclude dingoes from a third of the continent, however..... Dingoes not only compete with, but also kill cats and foxes. Where dingoes are abundant there are usually fewer feral predators."

Also of concern is the fact that kangaroo populations can reach unnaturally high levels inside the fence in the absence of dingo predation which adds extra grazing pressure on the vegetation. This has been called "the fence effect" by graziers, a noticeable reduction in vegetation on land inside compared to that outside the fence.