

A TRIP TO COOBER PEDY 1966

My brother-in-law John Mules had been involved with opal mining at Coober Pedy for some time and had his own underground dugout, he had purchased a 2nd hand Holden ute in Melbourne and needed to get it to Coober Pedy. It was an opportunity for me to get to Coober Pedy while I had the chance, so he & I and Chris Green headed out of Melbourne on Friday night on 1st leg to Adelaide.

Back in those days drink-driving albeit illegal didn't seem at the time to carry the same risk at getting caught or having an accident, so with a carton, probably VB & a roast chicken off we went. Drove right thru and arrived in Adelaide about 6am on the Saturday morning and called into a pub, John knew what would be open and it was occupied by some of his mining acquaintances of various nationalities.

I don't think we stayed long and pressed on north and from memory we called it a day at Port Augusta. Away early on the Sunday morning with plan to be in Coober Pedy by end of day. Stopped for a few photo shots, turn off to Woomera, Lake Hart, the rail line to West and a detour to Kingoonya, lunch? There had been some rain in recent times and some soft area to watch for and we soon came across a road train with 40t of concrete blocks for Coober Pedy, tried to dodge a soft area but bogged right down on one side. A bit further on we came across the road maintenance grader and stopped for a chat, he looked after ~ 400 miles, no other equipment and not sure where his cm was. His reaction to the plight of the bogged road train was, "let him wait, he's come thru too early after the rain", we found out the blocks were unloaded by hand, truck pulled out and then all reloaded. (current reflection that the grader driver was working on a Sunday)

We arrived in Coober mid late Sunday afternoon and John's brother Mike Mules (also into opal mining) was trying to teach a group of mostly "non-cricket playing" nationalities how to play the game on a flat stone covered area.

It was time for a beer, and we went to someone's dugout, the photos don't seem to show any from this visit, unless they are out of order. Eventually to was time to go & bed down at John's dugout, we thought someone had stolen a 12gal drum of petrol off the back of our ute, next morning when we came out we discovered we'd come home in the wrong ute! But at least it was a Holden, and everything sorted out.

I don't have any diary notes, but I think I was in Coober for another couple of days before heading home to Melbourne. The photos show that we had a pretty busy schedule during day and at night.

We went down a shaft, about 90' deep from memory and the miners were looking for a charge that didn't go off properly, safety for visitors was non existent (I should have known better) and for miners was a hard hat. Coming back up on the winchline I was very lucky not to lost a finger or too, as I came out of shaft, I swung my hand up above my head to steady my self and my fingers, the wire rope and the pully were coming into contact when they broke the winch.

We looked to have gone out to a pond for a swim, very shallow and not sure how clean we got, also visited a miners tin hut, would have been bloody hot in summer, and a shaft with a hand winch, bloody hard work.

At the end of the day it was back to a dugout for drinks, food? Taking of photos of people didn't seem to be an issue, and there were certainly a range of nationalities. I don't recall the names other than there might have been a 'Michello', and I think the operator of Opal Air is there in the group.

I think the name of one of the Aboriginals was Tommy Dodds and I bought a nulla nulla from him.

Before heading to the airstrip, we visited another resident's well-appointed dug out as well as the underground tourist shop.

Trip back to Adelaide good and able to see many features of the road route to Coober Pedy and it was then on home to Melbourne and back to work.

It was a great experience to visit Coober and especially so with John in that we went and saw more than the average tourist would have seen in those days and even today, especially the drinking session with "the locals".

I did many a trip with John including a memorable trip to White Cliffs and Broken Hill in 1965

Ken Morris, New Farm Dec 2020

Written up from memory and looking at trip photos (scanned from original colour slides), which have been given to the Coober Pedy Historical Society database.