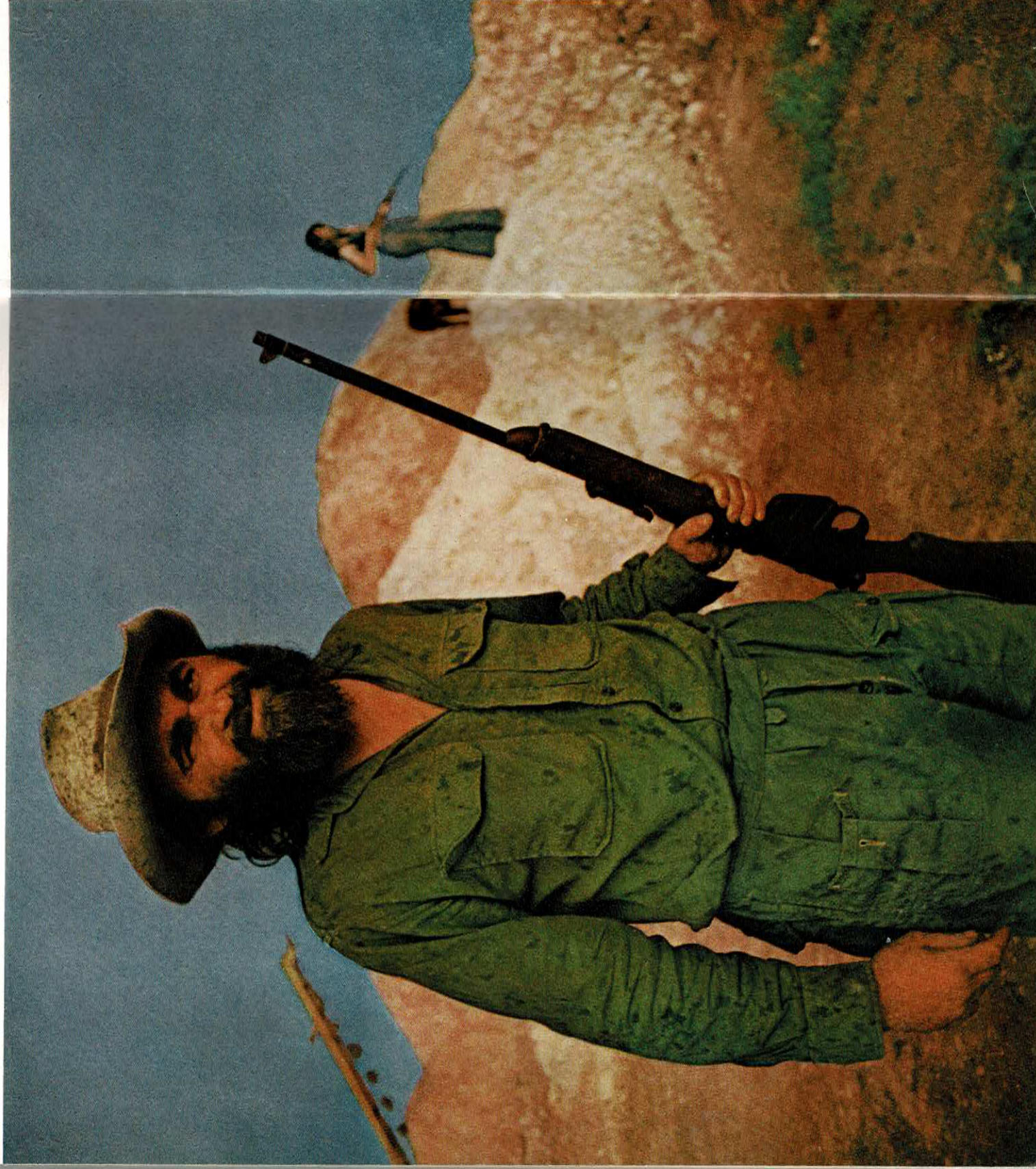


# Goober Pedy: Opal Capital of Australia's Outback

By KENNY MOORE

Photographs by  
PENNY TWEEDIE



**WE** CROUCHED on red, graveled hardpan, our backs to winter's cold southwesterly wind. "Now use the sharp eye," said opal prospector Danny Serdar. "Look for the white."

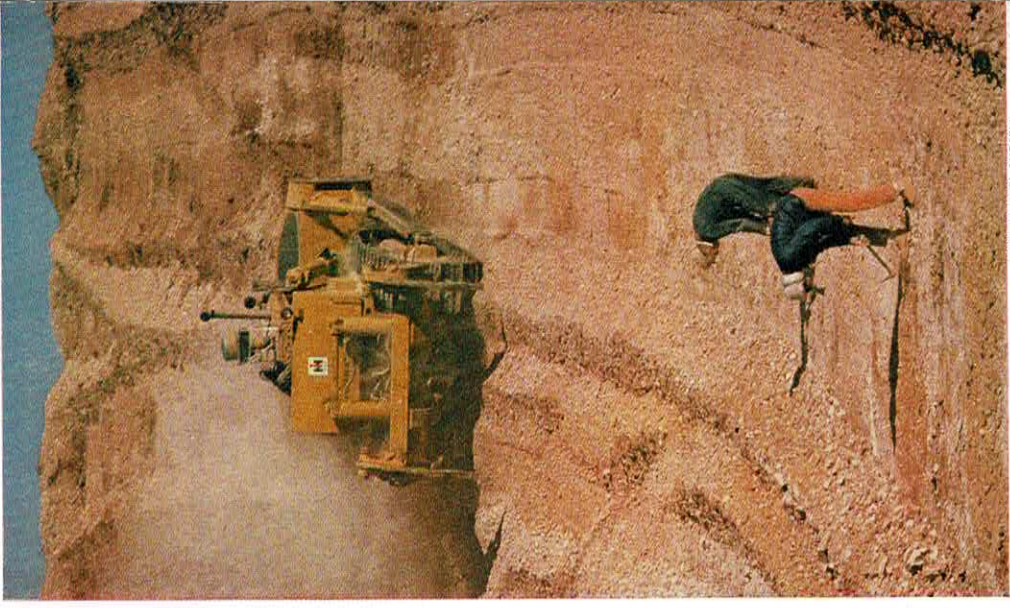
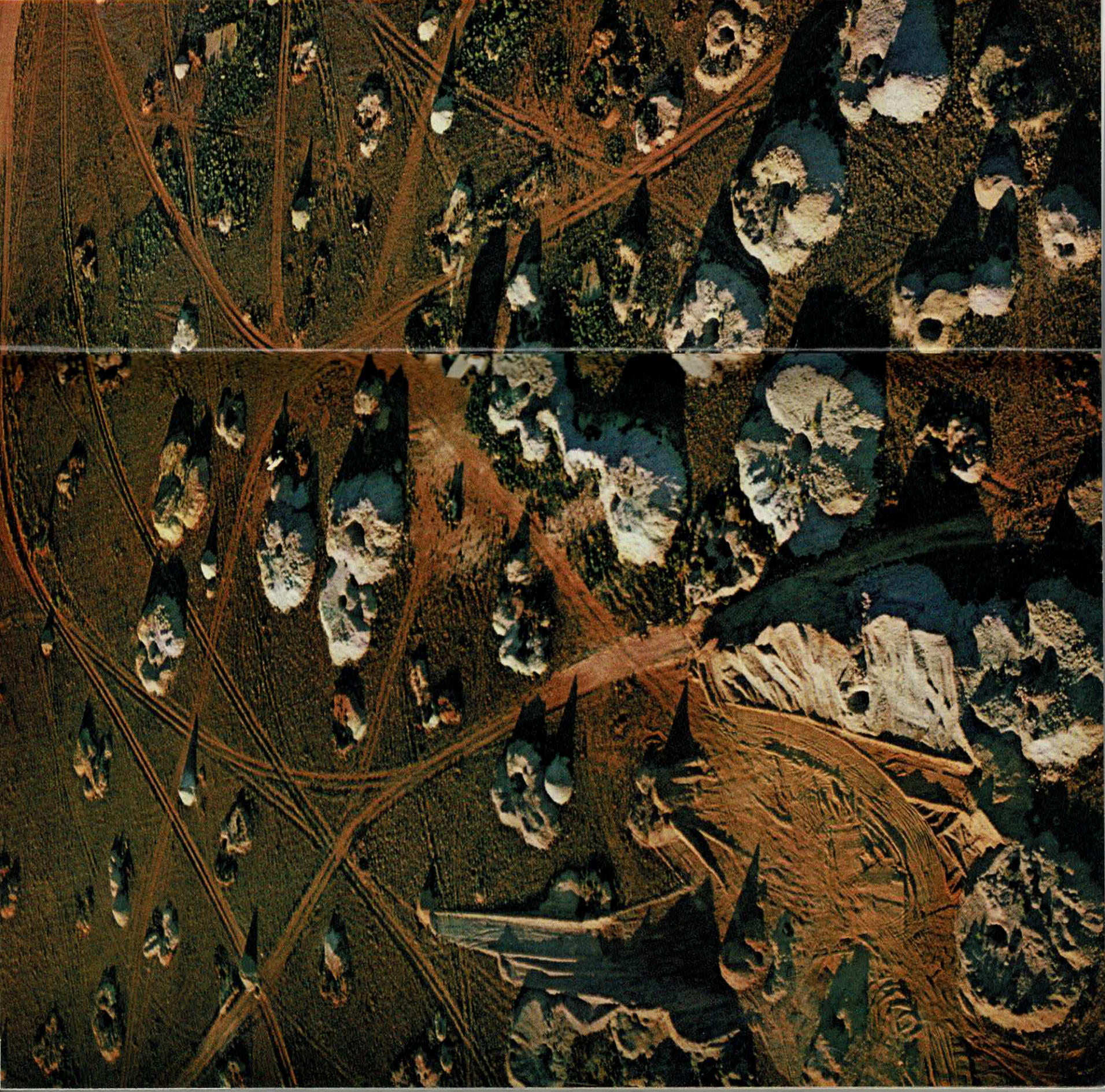
We had come twenty miles out from the rugged little settlement of Coober Pedy in South Australia. We had gone beyond most of the working opal fields, with their generators and bulldozers and tunneling machines, and were now on the endless plateau.

"Australia all around the edges is touched, closed, spoiled," Danny said in his thick Croatian accent, "but in the center is open, is waiting." He had explained that careful prospecting meant searching dry watercourses or depressions for surface opals, called "floaters," marking where each was found, then working to higher ground until no more appeared. Somewhere near the last loose stone must be their source, the spot where a seam of opal meets the surface.

Danny bent to one side, stood, and handed me a whitish pebble that sparkled with pink and green. I stared at the stone. He had found an opal lying out in plain sight. "Look for the white," he repeated.

I scrambled after him and began glaring at the ground in earnest. At length I found a bit of gray "potch"—common opal without fire. Then a bit more. Finally, with a whoop, a glimmer of milky orange. By that time Danny had filled a handkerchief with quality stones, one an opalized fossil shell.

**Armed and dangerous**—to thieves only—Josef Boucek of Czechoslovakia and Alice Burke of Ireland guard an Italian owner's claim in Coober Pedy, site of the world's richest opal field. Miners from 43 nations have congregated in this rugged boomtown in the desert of South Australia. All speak the same language, however, when it comes to the lure of shimmering, uncut opals (above).



BOTH BY CARL PURCELL

Monuments to the opal rush, piles of mine rubble pock the Coober Pedy plain (left). Most miners climb down shafts at least fifty feet deep to work the seams with pick and hammer. Other prospectors use bulldozers (above). Law allows each miner one 165-foot-square claim, thereby excluding large mining firms from this isolated area (map below). Partnerships and sales are sealed with a handshake.



We kept on through the morning, oblivious of time and the cutting wind. So I was introduced not only to the first steps in mining Australia's national gem, but also to its fever.

In fact, we were reenacting history. In 1915 J. R. Hutchison camped at the base of an escarpment called the Stuart Range, and went out to look for water. His son, meanwhile, amused himself by finding floaters. Thus the field later to be named Coober Pedy (pronounced COO-ber PEE-dee, from the Aboriginal dialect meaning "white man in a hole") had yielded its first opals. It has been producing ever since, now supplying more than half the world's gem opals.

From the air the dump heaps of Coober Pedy mines appear as ashes scattered on an immense tawny rug of outback. The township sits in the center of South Australia, 480 miles northwest of Adelaide, 375 south of

Alice Springs (map, page 563). The pilot of Opal Air's eight-passenger Cessna flight from Adelaide told of dust storms 15,000 feet high that howl for days.

"You can see down through the dust," he said, "but when it comes time to land, you can't find the strip because you have to look for it horizontally. Sometimes we wish there were another plane up top to make sure we're headed for the runway." Had I not been so involved with the landing he was then making on Coober Pedy's rocky airstrip, I might have asked how that second plane could get down. Instead, I was deposited in mute relief in what seemed a haphazard, impoverished community.

Corrugated metal sheds, surrounded by drying laundry, formed its suburbs. Except for a main street of bitumen, roads were unbelievably rutted and often lined with worn

tires and broken glass. The commercial center consisted of pub, miner's store, bank, motels, gas stations, and a supermarket. The surrounding area was splotted with salt-bush, scrubby mulga, and wild flowers, but inside the town almost nothing grew. Persistent, clinging flies refused to be brushed from my eyes and mouth.

Once past this initial impression, I found Coober Pedy a succession of cheering surprises. "Our wealth, and most of our beauty, is below ground," boomed Faye Naylor, a 15-year resident. "Ah, the tin sheds. Remember, they're not meant to be permanent. Those are for miners here to make it big and get out. The permanents live tremendously."

Faye, who runs an opal shop, offered as an example her own home, a dugout. This remarkable kind of dwelling is carved into the soft clay stone of the area. Because summer temperatures average 100 degrees Fahrenheit, it is highly advisable to live underground, and nearly half the people do just that. Faye Naylor's dugout had several levels, wall-to-wall carpeting, a wine cellar, and a small green swimming pool (following pages).

There is often a temptation to enlarge one's home, whether the family is growing or not. Danny Serdar showed me veins of potch and color in the walls of his kitchen and bedroom. "This house cost about \$4,400—that's in your U. S. dollars," he said, "but we found \$2,600 worth of opal while we were digging it. And a few years ago I dug a new bathroom and found \$900 more."

#### Opal Fever Creates a Melting Pot

Perhaps 15 percent of Coober Pedy's approximately 4,000 people are Australian born. "We're so cosmopolitan it's ridiculous," said Faye Naylor with a fierce pride. "The world thinks we're bums up here. Sure, the reason a lot of us came was greed—but once here, people lose sight of the quick quid; they put aside the fact that they're Greek or Pakistani or Dutch and become opal miners. Yes, the mine ratters [thieves] are here, but that's been going on since King Solomon's mines. It's not the real story of this town."

Part of that story is pay-as-you-go self-sufficiency. Coober Pedy has no real local government, although the state police maintain an office there. Instead, the Coober Pedy Progress and Miners Association, which was

started to provide amenities, has found itself responsible for fire fighting, road grading, and sanitation. A federally funded hospital, having no resident doctor, relies on the Royal Flying Doctor Service from Port Augusta, 300 miles to the south.

The association is supported by the Coober Pedy Drive-In Theatre, the town's chief entertainment. Yet even on a night out, one is never far from the basic work of mining opal. Witness the message flashed on the screen prior to each feature: "Patrons are asked not to bring explosives into this theatre."

#### Miners' Disputes Keep Officials Busy

I had the good fortune to dine at the pub one evening with Tony Starke and Fred Horie of the South Australia Department of Mines. Tony was the mining warden, and he rode a circuit, coming to Coober Pedy every six weeks to sit in judgment over local disputes. Fred, then district inspector of mines, lived in Coober Pedy and was charged with enforcing safety regulations. Both had plenty to do.

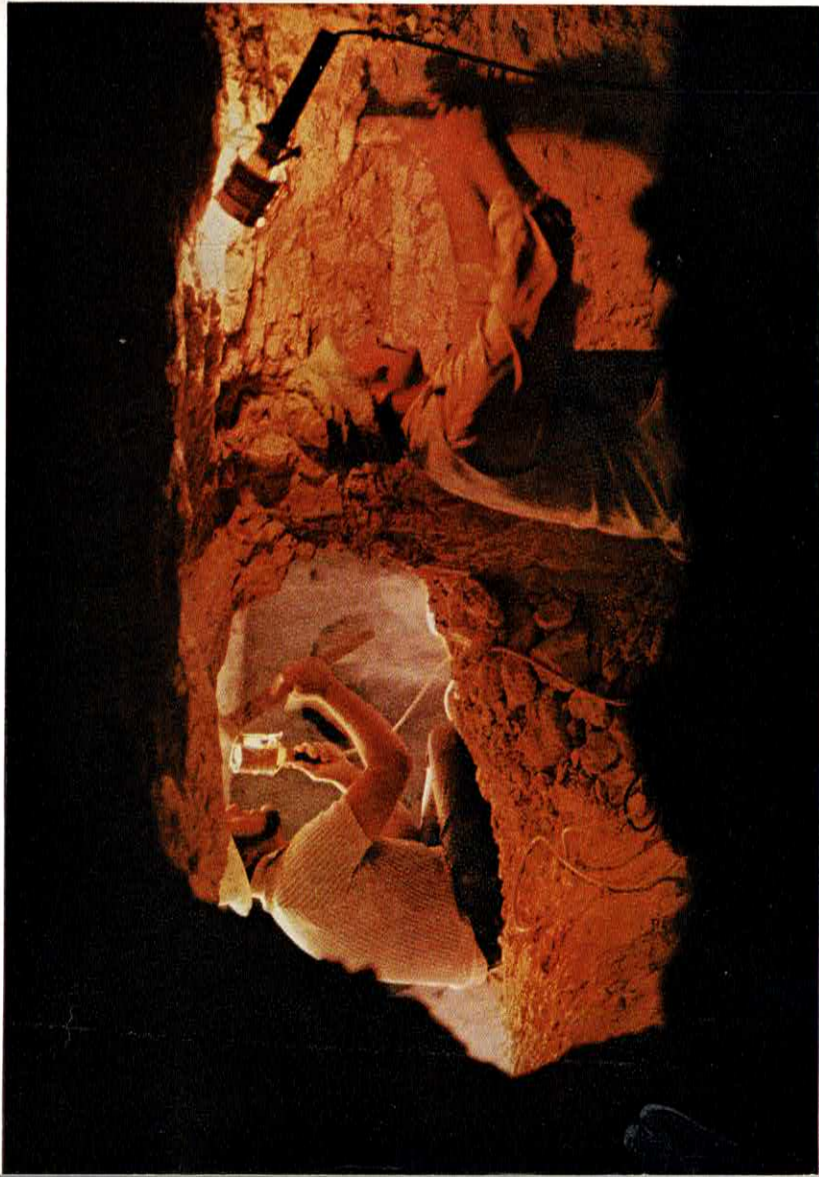
"The miners still make their agreements by word of mouth," Tony said, rolling his eyes in some dismay. "No paper whatsoever. Consequently, disputes are inevitable."

"Miners are essentially gamblers," said Fred. "They'll gamble their lives as well as their money by undercutting a bulldozed face, or using a poor ladder or a bad winch."

A bottle of wine, which none of us had ordered, arrived at the table. The waiter indicated a beaming man in mud-caked overalls across the room. "Ah," Tony laughed, "perhaps it's a bit of a bribe from one of tomorrow's litigants. This sort of thing used to bother me." It clearly did not now.

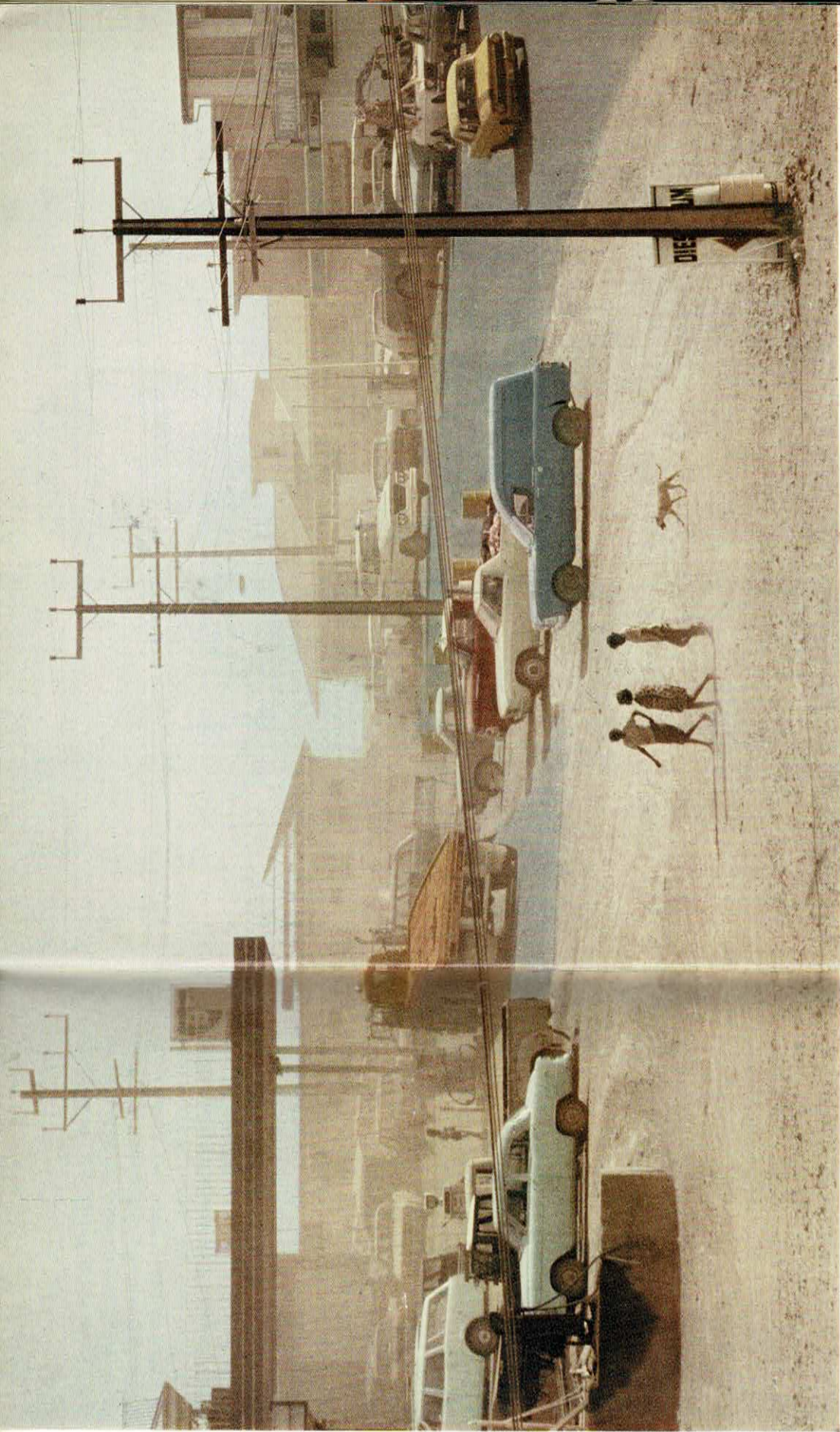
I asked the total value of all the opal taken from Coober Pedy in a year. Tony sighed. "We get our figures from buyers. A few years ago we had an influx of buyers from Hong Kong who prefer to underestimate." So officially about 25 million U. S. dollars a year is taken in opals, but the actual amount is probably nearer 55 million.

No large corporations engage in opal mining. "The law," said Tony, "says one man, one claim. Claims are limited to 165 feet square, and no more than four can be joined in a partnership. The government feels that this should be one place where a man might come with nothing and hit it rich."



Flash of color means pay dirt for Trevor Weatherill, left, and David Genat, ex-insurance men of Adelaide, as they delicately chip at an opal seam. In Coober Pedy—an Aboriginal phrase for "white man in a hole"—the most valuable stone displays a dense array of hues against a glassy background. No sure method exists to detect opal in the earth. But local lore offers one way: Drop your hat over your shoulder and dig where it lands.

Harsh as the fortune dealt most miners, the climate often sends dust storms howling through town (right). Since little vegetation grows in Coober Pedy, a resident welded together an iron tree (below) for children to play on.



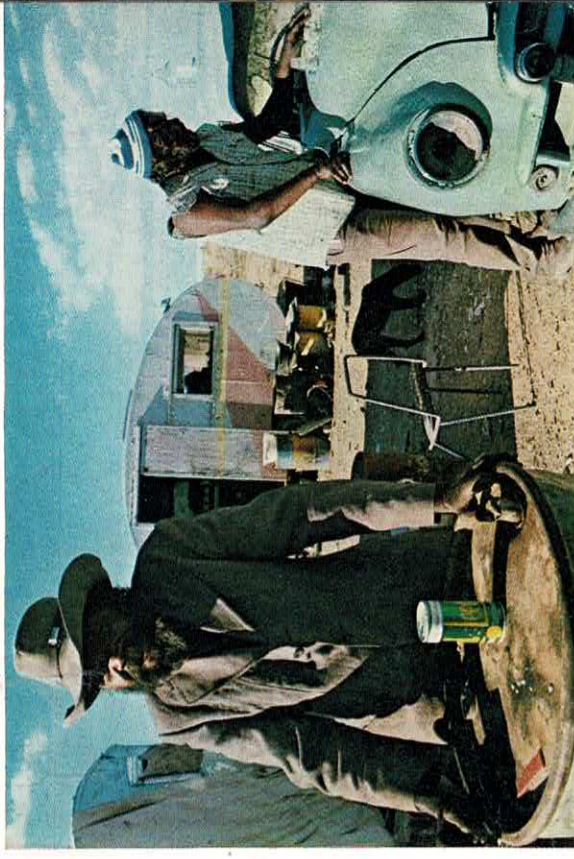
CARL PURCELL

Residents dig for opals in Coober Pedy, where nearly half the population of 4,000 live in homes carved into sandy clay stone. Economical to fashion, the dugouts provide relief from the 100° F. heat of summer. One owner has installed wall-to-wall carpeting, a wine cellar, and even a swimming pool (left). Leading vigorous social lives, townspeople divide their time between neighborhood parties (right), pub, ethnic clubs, and drive-in movies. The town has become a popular tourist attraction; more than 40,000 sightseers passed through last year.





**Selling water and renting bulldozers** provide a living for desert entrepreneur E. G. Kruse (left). Arriving in Coober Pedy during a drought in 1969, the Australian jack-of-all-trades sank bores to reach needed water. His bulldozers bring \$50 an hour, but he likes to bargain for a share of the miner's find. On the fringe of the mines live some three hundred Australian Aborigines, some of whom dwell in broken-down vehicles\* (below) and restrict their prospecting to "noodling"—poking through rubble.



"Have you ever thought of staking a claim?" I asked.

Tony and Fred turned to me and answered, "Never! Too unpredictable."

Doug Atkinson, who took up opal mining after a successful business career, has accepted the risks and challenges with zest. "I was in furniture manufacturing," he said. "I was obsessed with man-hours of labor. But up here there is no relation between how much you work and what you make because it takes work *and* luck to find opal. A geologist can't help you a bit. He may assure you there's no opal in an area, and you may find \$100,000 in your first cut. Why? Because the geologist dug his holes in the wrong place. This is not like gold or silver mining where you know if you move enough earth you'll get so much per ton. You have to be careful. Gold dust is just

as good as gold nuggets, but opal dust is worthless."

The nature of opal mining, calling for competitive, independent men, has colored the character of the town. But school principal Craig Cameron said: "Contrary to the rough-and-ready reputation of this place, it's good for kids. We have less vandalism and delinquency than anywhere else in South Australia. The kids aren't hemmed in. They can spend excess energy 'noodling' [picking through the dump heaps for opal missed by the miners], or just out in the country."

How accurate are reports that Coober Pedy life has its violent moments? "Exaggerated," said Craig. "In five years we've had one suicide and a couple of drunken soccer players down a mine shaft. One was killed. There is a brawl now and then. And I once saw a pistol

drawn in the pub. Of course there had to be a busload of tourists in. They dove for the floor and all that. No harm done, though."

#### Thirteen Months' Work—Eight Dollars

Having seen the surface Coober Pedy, I now descended into the miner's world. Trevor Weatherill, David Genat, and Owen Daw were working a claim in the "15-mile field." (Fields are usually designated by their distance from town.) I drove out with Trevor, a large, spirited man with an Abe Lincoln beard.

"The way it was a few years ago, a sane person wouldn't have come," he said, "but we did." He and David had been insurance men in Adelaide. "We put aside enough to live on for two years, convinced our wives we'd send for them soon, and started sinking holes by hand." Thirteen months later they had found

opal worth \$8. "Then we struck a parcel and it's been easier."

The men gave me a hard hat, escorted me to the dark mouth of their 60-foot shaft, started a generator and air compressor to power lights and drills, and directed me down a cold steel ladder. It was dangerously slick with talcum-fine dust, and I will admit to a tightening in my chest.

Once safely down, Trevor showed me through long rooms and "drives," horizontal tunnels that had followed seams. Work that day was at a face showing two veins of potch. Trevor took up a pneumatic "jack pick" (jackhammer) and like a shearer began slicing away white clay stone and gray alunite. The dust from the soft rock frosted his beard and eyebrows.

When several feet of space under the seams

had been cleared, David and Owen eased out chunks of gray, translucent potch with small hand picks. "This is what it all comes to," said David. "You dislodge a bit, and there's always the hope that when it comes away there will be a red eye staring at you."

I asked if most miners would keep on laboring in a shaft like this one after clearing out a big parcel. David looked up from licking a stone (examining it for "color"). "That's where the magic of it comes in," he said. "Once you've found it, you think you can again. Sometimes you can't."

"But sometimes you can give up too soon," Trevor said. "We owned a mine in the Olympic field southwest of town, drove a hundred feet, and gave it away. Some Yugoslavs came in, went six feet farther, and found \$125,000."

Everyone went quiet as Owen's pick struck something. "It's when you hear that china

clunk," whispered Trevor, "that you perk up." Owen pulled a sparkling opal out of the seam and handed it to Trevor, who looked at it with satisfaction. "That's about a tenth of an ounce. Maybe \$35." By noon the partners' plastic sack was full of colored stones.

David explained that the stones in the sack were lead opal, so called because it occurs in gray and opaque potch. "The best Coober Pedy opal is crystal opal," he said. "You can hold it to the light and see the colors and see through it as well."

#### Aborigines Cash In on Opal Bonanza

In town a miner receives between \$1,000 and \$4,000 an ounce for top-grade opal. Cut and shipped to Japan, Hong Kong, or the United States, it will retail for up to three times as much. The finest opals have become more expensive than many gems, though the ingredients of opal are commonplace stuff. Coober Pedy's opal, born millions of years ago, was deposited when groundwater containing particles of silica seeped into cracks in the bedrock. As the water evaporated, the particles became cemented together. Light bending around the silica produces the variety of glowing colors.

Trevor drove back to town a different way, and miles from any other diggings we passed a few old bulldozer cuts—a kind of opal strip mine. They were ringed by rusting automobile wrecks, most turned up on one side. "A fellow made these cuts about 18 inches too shallow," said Trevor, "and went away broke. The Aborigines came in, scraped a bit, and found thousands. The cars? That's where they lived." The Aborigines on the reserve near Coober Pedy average about \$4,000 apiece each year from just such noodling.

Trevor pointed to a rise near the 8-mile field. "A miner there had no winch, so he dug his shaft with the help of a spiral staircase. Every can of rock was carried up those stairs on his back!"

We stopped at the tin shack Trevor and David had lived in at the 8-mile field. Nostalgia rolled over Trevor. "Ah, it was good out here. The stars—there's nothing like them anywhere. And that deafening quiet... It's bigger than men."

Yet despite his love for the simple, hard life of earlier times, Trevor's is a voice for change. "The town is still divided on the



MARTIN ROGERS

**Prized for their vivid hues,** opals command retail prices from \$5 to \$3,000 a carat. The value of this 155-carat white opal in the Smithsonian Institution is \$10,000. In Coober Pedy, opals were formed some 30 million years ago as groundwater laden with silica slowly evaporated through clay stone. The dancing color is a prismatic effect resulting from light bending around the silica.

question, but we do need local authority. Hygiene is a basic problem. We have no power to tell people to haul their rubbish. The street is a disgrace. We lack adequate sewage. The state says, 'We're sorry, you're not a local government—get lost.'"

Once, in Adelaide, Trevor had interviewed applicants for Progress Association secretary. "I asked one fellow what he'd heard about Coober Pedy. He said, 'It's hell on earth, and any man who takes his wife there has no respect for her.'" Trevor said this as we pulled up before his own split-level dugout, his own attractive wife, Kate, stepping out to meet him. "He didn't get the job, of course."

In spite of such domesticity in Coober Pedy, frontier violence is not unknown, as Farid Khan, a buyer who has exported more than two and a half million dollars in opals, can testify. A few years ago, in Coober Pedy's Opal Inn, he had, in his words, "a bit of an accident." As he slept, thieves entered his room. He showed me the scar where they cut his throat. "But I fought my way out," he said calmly, "and kept my money." He was saved by the flying doctor service.

#### Old-timer Survives Six-day Ordeal

"Accidents" lacking any criminal element can be just as hair-raising. In a tiny, rattling shed amid a maze of dumps at the 8-mile field lived Jim Ledger. One night a few years ago, Jim fell into an old mine beside his hut, coming to rest on an oil drum wedged in a shaft 40 feet down. Six days and six nights he waited there, flyblown and dehydrated, having chewed off the brim of his felt hat to keep saliva in his mouth. He was 77 years old.

When I visited him in his hut, I asked, "What was it like to be down in that shaft for six days?"

"Well, I just kept thinking, 'I hope I soon peg out if I don't get found.' I was bummed, you see. My shirt and trousers were full of blood. I had blowfly maggots in my left hand. Once I tried to climb. I got up twenty feet, but my arms wouldn't hold me and my legs were crook. It was terribly cold. And only a chain

away from people. My voice was just about flat. Dogs came and looked in; they could hear, but all the silly others thought about was opal, opal, opal. But I knew old Binke, my old friend, would find me.

"And he did. He came down and asked if I was dead. He put me in mind of Daniel in the lion's den, he looked so frightened. They tied me in a chair, and I was singing. There was a nurse waiting on top. 'Turn the other way,' I said. 'I don't know that my clothes cover me.' Then I said, 'Thank you, good friends. This certainly put the Lord to the test.'"

Recently I learned Jim passed away several months ago. During my visit with him he had said: "I mean to keep on working. I'll die here. But I'm not much afraid of death now."

#### A Sumptuous Picnic in a Blooming Desert

The Lord was kind to all Coober Pedy during my stay, sending an unusually abundant rainfall. The desert bloomed, and to show me its beauties, the Weatherills, Genats, and Atkinsons loaded hampers, babies, and me into three sturdy Holden sedans and set out over rough tracks to picnic in Mickey Swamp, 35 miles away.

We passed through creek beds overflowing with lavender flowers, and finally reached a many-fingered body of beige water, crowded by low ti and coolabah trees. A pit was lined with coals, and a foil-wrapped wild turkey shot for the occasion was placed in it and covered with more coals and sandy earth. To help fend off starvation until the bird was done, steaks and sausages were grilled and served with pumpkin, fresh bread, onions, potatoes, and salad, eased along with beer or claret. The turkey came out steaming and juicy, served with roasted bananas and li-queurs topped with cream. As we all sat back, pulled at the turkey carcass with greasy fingers, and sipped our Tia Maria, even the flies seemed forgivable.

"A godforsaken country," rumbled Trevor Weatherill.

"Oh, yes," said David Genat. "Oh, yes. Hell on earth." □

#### SIX-MONTH INDEX AVAILABLE

As one of the benefits of membership in the National Geographic Society, an index for each six-month volume will be sent free to members, upon request. The index to Volume 149 (January-June 1976) is now ready.