

## First medical relief expedition, 1919

In 1919 a group of pastoralists and the South Australian government provided £1000 for a medical inspection of the health of Aboriginal people in the state's settled districts. Basedow was commissioned to undertake the work, with his wife Nell acting as nurse. The first of these expeditions was to inspect the health of Aboriginal people in north-eastern South Australia and some adjacent areas of Queensland. Hired for this expedition were Basedow's older brother Erwin and Richard Grenfell Thomas, the 18-year-old son of one of the pastoralists who helped finance the expedition. Erwin and Thomas both provided general assistance and looked after the expedition horses and buggies.

The departure point was Farina, on the railway line south of Marree, where four days were spent organising supplies and horses. Leaving Farina on 13 August, the party travelled to Mount Lyndhurst station and along the Strzelecki Track to Innamincka, making a detour across the border to Durham Downs station. After returning to Innamincka they continued northwards to Birdsville, again just over the border, arriving there on 23 October. From here they

travelled south along the Birdsville Track to Marree, where they caught a train back to Adelaide.

During the expedition, horses and two buggies were used as transport, while a third buggy was acquired for crossing a difficult stretch of heavy sandhill country after Murnpeowie station. Other than sandhills, the terrain tended to be flat to undulating plains, lake pans and gibber country (desert terrain strewn with stones). As much of the area was in drought and bare of grass cover, dust storms were reasonably commonplace. On the leg between Innamincka and Cordillo Downs station the expedition struck a particularly savage one, as Thomas noted in his diary entry for 6 October:

After lunch the wind & dust increased till a furious gale was blowing & it was impossible to see more than a few yards in front. We were obliged to spend most of the afternoon huddled behind two old iron tanks at the bore ... By three o'clock I had taken refuge inside one of the tanks which was a perfect haven after outside.

**Station employees, Innamincka station, South Australia 1919**

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A daily routine was soon established. Erwin and Thomas located the horses while breakfast was prepared. Sometimes the horses wandered considerable distances overnight in search of feed and it could take a few hours to find them. At lunch camp, the horses were hobbled to prevent them from straying. After the party reached the day's destination, the gear they needed was unloaded, the horses taken to feed and the evening meal prepared. They took their own food but sometimes supplies were supplemented at stations or with game they procured themselves. Water was rarely a problem as the expedition's route took in bores and waterholes. However feed for the horses was another matter. The grass around many bores and settlements had been overgrazed and the horses had to be taken some distance to find sufficient feed. Midway through their journey at Ringamurra, east of Birdsville, the group cut 14 bags of Mitchell grass to sustain the horses through a drought-afflicted area. Later in the journey the days became very hot, and the horses had to be periodically rested for a day or two. Despite their efforts one horse died of exhaustion towards the end of the journey.

On 6 September they reached the small settlement of Innamincka. While in the area the party visited sites associated with the ill-fated Burke and Wills expedition. At Innamincka station camp, Basedow and Thomas met Jim Mariner (or Danbidelli), a Yandruwandha man. In his expedition report, Basedow noted that Danbidelli 'in 1861 witnessed

the arrival of the Burke and Wills Expedition at the Cooper Creek and subsequently helped to succour the unfortunate men when they were dying from starvation'.

In all, Basedow medically examined 254 Aboriginal people, mostly at pastoral stations along the way, out of a total population he estimated at 380. Non-Aboriginal people also took the opportunity to seek medical attention from Basedow. Towards the end of the expedition, while camped near Mount Gason with a party from Mount Gason station, everyone but Nell and Thomas came down with dysentery. Thomas noted that 'after breakfast it was like a dispensary in camp for everyone was up for a dose of medicine & Doctor was kept quite busy'.

In Basedow's 1920 report to the South Australian Government, he made a number of recommendations including removing seriously ill Aboriginal people to a 'central station for specific treatment' and the establishment of 'several' reserves for Aboriginal people. At the same time, he was pessimistic about the survival of Aboriginal people in the north-east of South Australia and wanted action taken. He concluded: 'So far as the North Eastern tribes are concerned my appeal may come too late, for those interesting relics of primitive humanity are doomed to an early extinction ... But the ghastly conditions in the North East have prompted me with urgency in action, lest a similar fate befall the remaining tribes of our State.'