

Second medical relief expedition, 1920

Four and a half months after returning from the first medical relief expedition to north-eastern South Australia, Herbert and Nell Basedow set off on a second medical relief expedition. This time they travelled alone and their itinerary included locations along the state's coast to Eucla, just across the Western Australian border, as well as parts of the Nullarbor Plain, returning along the Transcontinental railway line east to Port Augusta. During the two-month-long expedition they travelled in a range of hired vehicles, including at least two cars, a truck and a mule-drawn buggy. The final stage of the expedition was by train.

On 10 April the Basedows departed Port Adelaide on the SS *Quorna*, arriving at Port Lincoln the following day. Three days later they caught a train to Ceduna or Thevenard and from there travelled in a hired car. Medical examinations were conducted at Murat Bay, Denial Bay and Koonibba, before the couple headed to Fowlers Bay, via Yalata station.

On 25 April the Basedows left for Nullarbor station, travelling by buggy and car. From here they then

headed west to Eucla in the station's Ford truck, returning three days later. They used the same truck to journey from Nullarbor station to Fisher, on the Transcontinental railway line. Making their way east, catching trains as convenient, they stopped at various sidings to carry out medical inspections, arriving at Port Augusta, their final destination, on 6 May.

During the second relief expedition Basedow examined 406 individuals, with chest and eye complaints being the most common ailments. Most were inspected at Koonibba mission and at Ooldea on the rail line, where they met Daisy Bates. Bates had arrived at Oldea in 1919 and continued her welfare work there for a further 16 years. In her time, she was well-known as an amateur anthropologist, producing 270 newspaper articles on various aspects of Aboriginal cultures.

Basedow and Bates did not get on and around the time of the second expedition were engaged in a war of words. Basedow used his report on the expedition to the South Australian Government to criticise Bates:

**Nullarbor station's
T-Model Ford truck in
which Herbert Basedow
travelled to Eucla, Western
Australia and, later, from
Nullarbor station to Fisher,
South Australia 1920**

reproduced from film negative

At Ooldea over a hundred of such people were being detained for the simple reason, it appeared, of serving the ambitious aims of Mrs. Daisy Bates who was camped half a mile from the settlement. The natives assured us that food and clothing had been promised them, but — suffice it to say — several camps of aged individuals were found the occupants of which were naked and on the verge of starvation!

In June 1920 Basedow sent a telegram to William Hague, commissioner of public works, saying that he had completed the second medical expedition and was undertaking the third. This was reported in the Adelaide press and Bates wrote a letter soon after to Adelaide's *Advertiser* saying:

Dr. Basedow reached Ooldea on the morning of May 3, walked down to the natives' camp, told those of the natives whom he saw (about half the number in camp), to 'strip and be photographed', which they obligingly did, partly because of the tobacco that was promised them.

In this case the photographic record perhaps speaks for itself; of the Aboriginal people Basedow is known to have photographed at Ooldea, only the children are shown naked. Certainly, at this time it was common for Aboriginal children to be unclothed

in settled areas. Also Bates's claim that Basedow photographed 'about half the number in camp' cannot be substantiated if Basedow's statement that there were more than 100 people at Ooldea when he visited is correct. In fact, a total of 10 people, of whom only three were adults, appear in photographs Basedow is known to have taken at Ooldea. Even if there are Ooldea people among the undocumented photographs in the collection, this would only increase the number by a handful.

In his assessment of the expedition, Basedow found the overall health of people examined along the coastal fringe to be better than what he had seen the previous year. Basedow was concerned that contact with Europeans inevitably led to declines in Aboriginal health and population mainly due to the spread of new diseases and starvation through natural food sources becoming depleted as colonisation spread. He made a recommendation that Aboriginal people should be prevented from going within a certain distance of the railway line and encouraged to return to the 'wilds'. But before doing so, he suggested, it would be 'highly commendable to subject them to a critical examination and detaining any tainted individuals for subsequent treatment in the Port Augusta Hospital'. His proposed solution perhaps highlights the dilemma Basedow faced in how to best improve the health of Aboriginal people in a rapidly changing social environment.