

Vice-regal expedition to central Australia, 1923

Sir Tom Bridges, Governor of South Australia from 1922 to 1927, was keen to encourage the opening up of Central and Northern Australia by building a north–south railway. To inspect the region for himself and assess its potential for development, Bridges made a three-week-long expedition by car with a distinguished party that included Herbert Basedow. The other members were Sir Henry Barwell, Premier of South Australia, William Webb, Chief Commissioner of the South Australian Railways, NG Bell, Commonwealth Railways Commissioner, the Hon. Thomas MacCallum MLC (who organised the trip), Captain Hambleton, aide-de-camp to the Governor, and Murray Aunger, owner of the expedition cars.

Aunger supplied three Dort four-cylinder cars for the expedition, two of which were modified to carry luggage, equipment and fuel (the bulk of the fuel was sent on ahead by camel to various depots along the route). To assist the vehicles in crossing sandhills and sandy river beds, Aunger had developed removable grips for the tyres. Only one spare tyre was taken on the trip, which, miraculously, was never required.

Departing Adelaide on 15 June, the party travelled by train to Oodnadatta, picking up the cars at Terowie, on the railway line between Burra and Peterborough. Travelling north from Oodnadatta, their first port of call was Hamilton Bore, reached after a seven-hour drive. On 18 June they arrived at Charlotte Waters telegraph station, on Coglein Creek, a little north of the South Australian–Northern Territory border, covering almost 100 kilometres in eight hours. Their next destination was Horseshoe Bend station, a 125-kilometre drive that took eight and a half hours.

From Horseshoe Bend the party continued northward. They soon came upon the Depot Sandhills, which stretched for 45 kilometres and took a gruelling half-day to traverse. In an article for the *Australian Motorist*, published in August 1923, Aunger described the crossing:

We crossed dozens of sand hills with the full complement of four passengers, their luggage, and large supplies of petrol. One can hardly realise what it means to drive a car

**Bogged on the Burt Plain,
Northern Territory 1923**

reproduced from glass plate negative

across loose sand with high tufts of spinifex and prickly porcupine grass, without a track. It is not so bad for the second and third cars, for they have the tracks of the leading car to follow. As an engineer, it makes one's heart bleed to hear the screeching of the engine and the slipping of the back wheels whilst the car was bouncing over these huge prickly bushes, etc. These hills in places are sixty feet [18.3 metres] high with a gradient of one in seven.

After another 125 kilometres of mostly difficult terrain, the expedition arrived at Alice Springs on 21 June. En route they passed the camels carting their fuel supplies, and about 50 Aboriginal people on their way to Alice for a 'corroboree' to be held in the Governor's honour. On the approach to the town, beyond Heavitree Gap, Aboriginal people lined both sides of the road. In the town itself the Governor was greeted by the European residents, including school children who sang the national anthem as the Governor stepped from his car. The following night the corroboree was held despite heavy rain, which forced the vice-regal party to retire early. Another was staged a few nights later once the weather had improved. The party was also entertained by the town's citizens at the jail, which doubled as a hall.

From Alice Springs, short exploratory trips were made to Central Mount Stuart and the Arltunga goldfield. On 28 June they drove west to Hermannsburg Mission, where the inhabitants formed a guard-of-honour and sang the national anthem in both English and 'their native tongue', probably Arrernte. The

following day some of the party visited Palm Valley on horseback.

The party was advised against driving back to Oodnadatta from Hermannsburg, but decided to anyway, partly because Basedow, who had travelled the route previously on camel, was convinced the cars would make it safely. They succeeded triumphantly — in the first cars ever to travel this route — and reached Oodnadatta on 5 July. Two hours later they were on a train to Adelaide. In the three weeks they were away, the expedition had covered just over 2300 kilometres.

In August, Basedow gave a lecture to 'a large gathering of representative citizens, who assembled at the invitation of the Premier' at Adelaide's town hall. Sir Tom Bridges provided an initial overview of the trip, which was reported in the Adelaide *Advertiser*:

The object of the journey we made was to see for ourselves what the centre of Australia was like ... On the one hand people described it as an arid waste, a place unfit for settlement, and 'the dead heart of Australia.' On the other the enthusiast classed [it] as 'a land of milk and honey,' and a veritable El Dorado, only waiting to be peopled. Probably after hearing the lecture you will find out that the real truth lies between the two descriptions.

After returning from the expedition, both the Governor and Premier called for the Commonwealth to extend the railway. The line, from Oodnadatta to Alice Springs, was completed in 1929.