

Third medical relief expedition, 1920

In early May 1920, at the end of the second medical relief expedition, Herbert and Nell Basedow travelled directly to Marree, in north-eastern South Australia, to prepare for the third and final expedition. This time Basedow was to inspect the health of Aboriginal people on South Australian pastoral stations between Marree and Charlotte Waters, just over the border in the Northern Territory, and taking in Oodnadatta. He was also commissioned by the Federal Government to provide medical relief to parts of the southern Northern Territory.

On 22 March 1920, Basedow had written to Alexander Poynton, Federal Minister for Home and Territories, offering to examine the health of Aboriginal people in central Australia. As little was known of the health status of Aboriginal people in the region at the time, Basedow's offer was accepted. Covering an area from Charlotte Waters telegraph station to Hermannsburg, and east to Alice Springs and Arltunga, this commission added about six weeks to the duration of the expedition.

Frank Feast, whom Basedow had met the previous year, joined the Basedows at Quorn, en route to Marree, taking on a general assistant's role. Aged 17, Feast was already a capable bushman and keen to travel. For him the expedition presented a marvellous opportunity to see a remote part of Australia and travel with an eminent scientist. He was given a camera by two aunts before he left Adelaide and the photographs he took on this and later expeditions provide a valuable record of Basedow's work and life in remote Australia in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Setting out from Marree on 12 May, the party travelled in a hooded van drawn by four camels. En route, possibly at Oodnadatta, they were joined by Arrerika (Punch), an Arrernte man, who was hired to look after the camels. Arrerika was also known to Basedow, having been a member of the 1903 government north-west prospecting expedition.

Travelling on tracks, sometimes adjacent to the North-South Railway Line, they visited stations along the

**Frank Feast driving the
expedition caravan through
flooded country, central
Australia 1920**

reproduced from glass plate negative

route, reaching Charlotte Waters on 13 June. From here they headed north-west to Hermannsburg, an Aboriginal mission, which would be their base for 10 days. As Basedow was running to his own schedule, he could take the time to visit places of scientific interest such as Palm Valley, where an extraordinary range of plants including cycads, a rarity in arid zones, could be examined.

At Hermannsburg, two Aboriginal girls, Tjikanna and Unndela, both about nine years of age, joined the Basedows, later returning with the couple to Adelaide to live. The party arrived at Alice Springs on 27 July and stayed with local policeman, Robert Stott, who was also the town's Protector of Aboriginals. The following day Basedow attended to patients before heading eastwards, arriving in Arltunga on 3 August.

Two days were spent carrying out medical duties and inspecting the geology of this gold mining centre and nearby White Range. Basedow then travelled north on horseback to Harts Range, guided by Mounted Constable Charles Noblet and Ted, an Aboriginal man, to make further medical and geological investigations, returning to Arltunga two days later. On the return journey to Alice Springs, the expedition skirted the northern part of the eastern Macdonnell Ranges, stopping at Winnecke's Depot and Bond Springs station to conduct medical examinations of Aboriginal people. From Alice Springs they headed south to Oodnadatta via

Horseshoe Bend and Charlotte Waters, stopping for medical inspections at stations east of their northward route. On 4 September they arrived at Oodnadatta from where they caught a train back to Adelaide, arriving there five days later.

On this expedition Basedow examined 250 Aboriginal people in South Australia and more than 600 in the Northern Territory. Overall he found the health of these people to be better than those he examined in the north-east of the state during the first medical relief expedition. Again, people living in settled districts were less healthy than those living away from settled districts. Eye troubles were the most common ailments, although Basedow noted many other diseases, ranging from colds and influenza through to venereal diseases and severe tissue destruction in the face, a condition he referred to as gangosa. Malnutrition was common among the children that he examined.

In his final report to the South Australian government, he called for 'a thorough medical control of [Aboriginal people's] health and living affairs', adding that there was nothing new in what he was proposing. He compared the case in Australia with that of Indigenous peoples in New Zealand, the United States and South Africa, which were 'fulfilling their pledges towards the native races they have dispossessed while Australia still neglects her duty'.