

HE PEELS GAOL POTATOES

★ **ALBERT NAMATJIRA**, sentenced to six months' gaol yesterday for supplying liquor to another aboriginal, is considering an appeal.

The 60-year-old artist is in Alice Springs gaol — doing odd jobs like pushing a broom and peeling potatoes.

Today Herald correspondent Douglas Lockwood tells the story of the . . .

Rise and fall of Namatjira

By **DOUGLAS LOCKWOOD**

ALICE SPRINGS, Today. — What do you say when you see gaol gates closing behind a man you have regarded as a friend for 12 years?

What do you say when that man happens to be someone who, by his own efforts, has raised himself from the dirt and dust of a tribal aboriginal's camp to the stature of a cultured white man?

Dejected, downcast, and grief stricken at his own failure in the white man's world, Albert Namatjira was led off to the prison, even beautiful, Alice Springs gaol here last night.

He walked in step with the sergeant of police who escorted him. Then the gates opened and they disappeared.

Namatjira, unless he appeals, will stay there for six months; cut off from the magnificent reds, blues and purples of the nearby McDonnell Ranges that have won him fame around the globe through his paint brush.

Two years ago the great black artist was made free by an award of full citizenship and told that henceforth, regardless of the badge in his skin, he had equal status with all other citizens.

But he didn't learn that his friends and relatives could not share some of the liquid amenities to which his new status entitled him.

He slumped against the white man's society, and is now paying the price in gaol.

★ **H**e did unto others as he would have others do to him — he gave a taste of rum.

He knew the white law said he couldn't, he knew the black law said he must. The black law was and Albert lost.

The native tribes of Central Australia have been sharing and sharing alike as primitive hunter-gatherers. Communal for centuries, sometimes long before Maori and English appeared with the skin.

A native who appeared a stranger knew instinctively that he didn't owe it to his personal food.

The kangaroo had eaten grass and drunk water which was shared by the tribe. It was, therefore, a tribal gain.

Albert Namatjira was brought up on these strict rules so that when he became a citizen it wasn't hard for him to adapt them to other goods.

In fact it was mandatory. To have denied his friends a drink would have been to lose them. So much less than I'm convinced he would always take his share on going to prison.

★ **A** FEW years ago Albert sat in the Darwin S.O.B.'s sipping tea from a delicate cup

and even using a cake fork.

I could have been out into Flinders Bay and for six months if I had given him a glass of beer.

But I didn't have to offer because Albert had volunteered a statement which is not true now. "I don't drink liquor," he said then.

What caused the change? What gave him his taste for strong drink? I believe that his conviction was accepted not in his camp at Morris Bank, but in those remote, unpopulated surroundings in suburban Sydney.

He rubs down the older dates almost exactly from the time he began attempting roared parties on publicly funded (and necessarily his own pocket) to southern capitals.

We got the facts — but he had no natural resistance. And today it is obvious that he drinks because he can't stop.

Namatjira can't take his tea in a hotel and teach his friends to drink.

He can give his wife a drink, but not his son or his chick.

It is . . . easy to understand that men are persecuted and that women are chastised in the tribal nations before you can appreciate the significance of that.

★ **L**AST year the old-grey-haired artist of the Aranda married a £7000 as an artist.

Today he is completely impoverished and I believe has been seeking solace in drink from the results of the debilitation he attempted to enter.

Thirty years ago he began work as a cook and moved on to former Melbourne artist Ben Rattaloo who was on a painting job in Central Australia.

Albert watched Rattaloo paint. One day when Rattaloo returned for lunch he found Albert had explored the canvas and had moved before to paint with one of his brushes.

"This is how you do it," Rattaloo explained. And later he told me, "I gave Albert only two weeks tuition."

He had his first exhibition at the museum where his ancestors had painted primitively by natural desire on bark and bidgee.

After the war some of his paintings were sent to Melbourne. From there was a demand for an exhibition and thereafter his pictures sold like hot air in the desert.

He was soon receiving £2000 a year. Before long the figure rose to £3000 and finally to an incredible £7000.

★ **B**UT the tribal law was there behind him. A few for his mother's brother; money for a canoe, £2000 for a truck, £2000 for another truck, £2000 for a third truck.

The money, no matter how much it was, never kept pace with his ability to spend — or rather to share with his relatives of friends and relations.

And so it was when he got the taste for beer and wine and finally rum. They had to be shared.

Now he is in a place where there are none of those things; a place where he will be locked in at night, not able to see the stars which have guided his life and his ancestors' eyes for generations.

I can see no answer to his problem. It is not hard to be steadily sorry for the black skin of Albert Namatjira when the sick pain of a white man—a white man if ever there was one.

"Between two civilisations" See Page 3

