SINGING STRINGS

A History of the
Cardwell – Normanton Telegraph Line
Far Nth. Qld.

compiled by Ray Langford

Figure 1
Cyprus pine telegraph pole erected in 1872 – Undara 2007

Photo Front Cover
The Heritage Hut beside Iron Pot Creek at Undara, site of a construction camp during the building of the Cardwell-Normanton telegraph line in 1871-72

Tom Clifford.

Singing Strings

A History of the Cardwell to Normanton
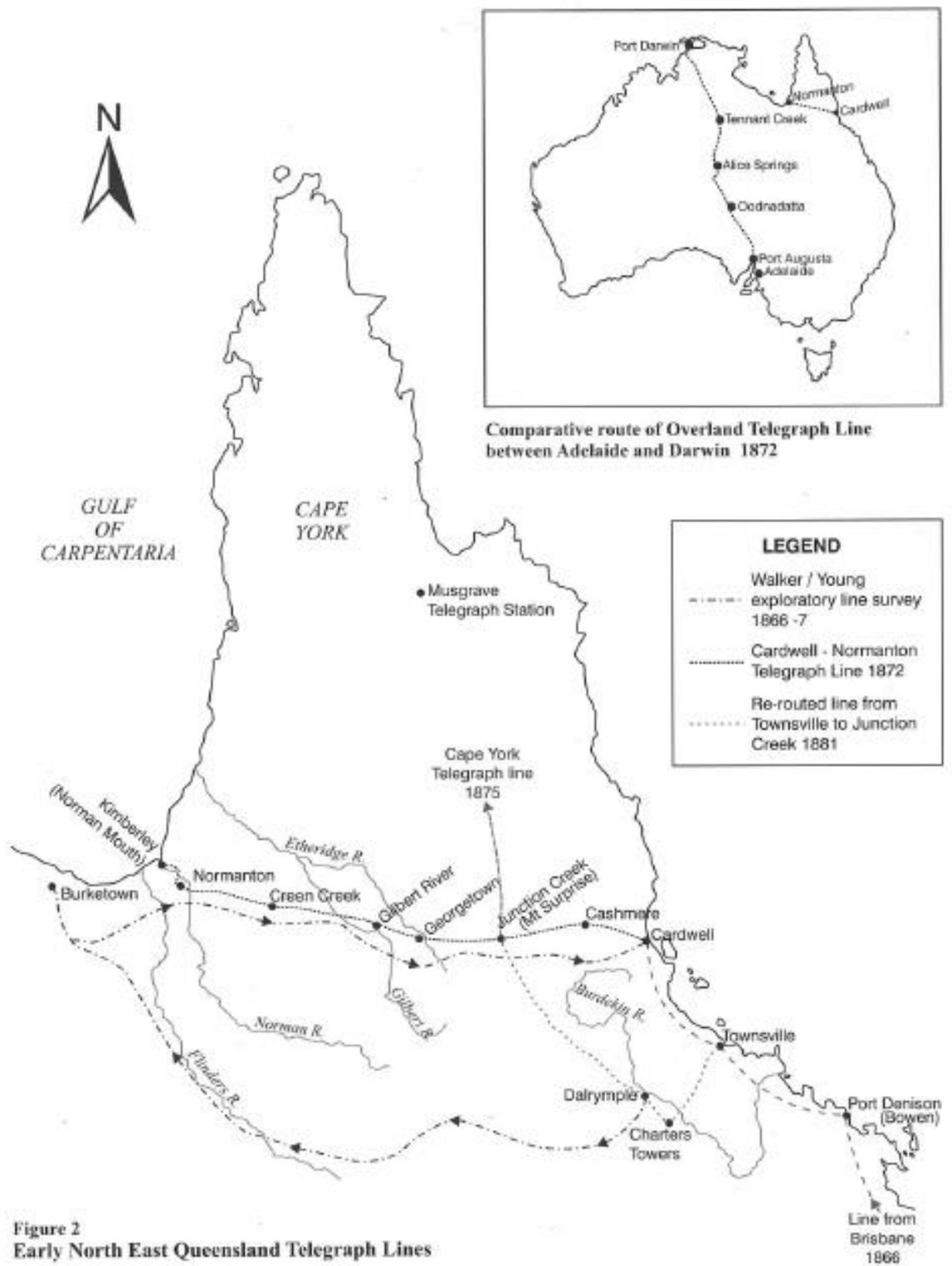## Telegraph Line
Far North Queensland

by   **Ray Langford**

N

Port Darwin
Normanton
Cardwell
Tennant Creek
Alice Springs
Oodnadatta
Port Augusta
Adelaide

Comparative route of Overland Telegraph Line between Adelaide and Darwin 1872

GULF
OF
CARPENTARIA

CAPE
YORK

● Musgrave
Telegraph Station

LEGEND

—·—·— Walker / Young exploratory line survey 1866 -7

··········· Cardwell - Normanton Telegraph Line 1872

········· Re-routed line from Townsville to Junction Creek 1881

Cape York
Telegraph line
1875

Kimberley
(Norman Mouth)

Etheridge R.

Normanton

Creen Creek

Gilbert River

●Burketown

Georgetown

Gilbert R.

Junction Creek
(Mt Surprise)

Cashmere

Cardwell

Burdekin R.

Norman R.

Townsville

Flinders R.

Dalrymple ●

Port Denison
(Bowen)

Charters
Towers

Line from
Brisbane
1866

Figure 2
Early North East Queensland Telegraph Lines

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Dedication

This booklet is dedicated to my father, one of the last telegraphists, and all those who practiced the art before him.   *R.L.*

Acknowledgements

Foreword

Noting the absence of formal references in this book, the reader should understand this story has emerged from a compilation of many unchecked second and third hand historical sources. Nevertheless every reasonable effort has been made to maintain factual accuracy, and obvious errors in the record have been corrected. Measurements of weight and distance have been written in the manner of the period, as with money.

Where authenticity or exactitude of information has been in doubt, the uncertainty has been identified as such in the text. Thus the restrictions of rigid historical discipline and compliance have been softened to present a more readable story to the broader community.

Where possible emphasis has been placed on the human element and credit has been given, albeit obliquely at times, to those intrepid North Queenslanders of the late Victorian period who put their lives on the line - literally.

Index of Photos, Diagram & Maps

Index of Photos, Diagram & Maps

Introduction

By the late 1860's, that miracle of communications the electric telegraph had already been introduced into all Australian colonies, and telegraphic links between most capital cities highlighted the wisdom of inter-colonial co-operation. Nevertheless, some colonies on occasions were still in pursuit of singular domestic agendas.

As the approaching international telegraph cable from Europe moved inexorably through Java towards north Australia in 1867, the two colonies best situated to take commercial advantage of it - Queensland and South Australia (which then controlled the Northern Territory) - plunged into fierce competition. Both colonies subsequently committed huge funds and resources to each building a new telegraph line through undeveloped and in places unexplored country. The goal of each was to link with the international cable somewhere on the north Australian shoreline.

With the construction of what we now know as the Overland Telegraph Line across the continent from Adelaide to Port Darwin, the South Australians won the race. This epic feat of endurance and determination overshadowed the efforts of Queensland to carry out a similar but smaller task from Cardwell on the east tropical coast, across lower Cape York to Normanton on the Gulf of Carpentaria. History has largely overlooked the construction and early operation of the Cardwell to Normanton telegraph line, partly because it came second in a two horse race.

The North Queensland story however has all the elements of heroic hardship embodied in so many noble Victorian enterprises on the colonial frontier. The story is the execution of a grand vision and a bold gamble that helped lay the foundation for white settlement in North Queensland. The subsequent operation of the telegraph line was no less admirable. This is that story.

Cairns Historical Society

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Index of Photos, Diagram & Maps

What Hath God Wrought?

For thousands of years, people had recognized the advantages of separating communication from transportation. In the interests of haste, ways and means were devised to transfer information from one person to another as a projected substitute for the human voice, e.g. horns, drums, fire and smoke, reflected light, flags etc. For instance, the English were warned of the approach of the Spanish Armada in 1588 by the consecutive lighting of hilltop beacons across southern England to London. As with modern sign language, these strategies all required a pre-arranged code understood by both sender and receiver.

On the 24th May 1844, American artist and inventor Samuel Morse was credited with transmitting the worlds first telegraphic message along a U.S. government-funded wire stretching about 40 miles between Washington and Baltimore by using coded electrical impulses. That message, a cryptic cautionary Biblical reference which read *'What hath God wrought ?'*, would perhaps have been more appropriate for the development of the atomic bomb a century later.

In Britain and Europe during the late 1700's and early 1800's, scientists had been exploring the relationship between magnetism and electricity as a possible means of communication. The invention of a practical electrochemical cell (battery) by the Italian Volta in the 1790's provided a

Figure 3   Undara Nth. Qld. 2006
Original telegraph pole and fittings over 135 years old.

steady manageable source of electric current for the first time. Shortly afterwards it was realized that an electric current flowing through a wire coil excited a suspended magnet nearby, a seemingly minor observation but one which held quite profound implications.

The success in sending and receiving electromagnetic pulses along a conducting wire led to the issue of converting the pulses into information, i.e. language. Where others had come up with cumbersome and complicated concepts, the genius of Morse was that he proposed the basic idea of 'dots and dashes'.

This was achieved by using a hand-operated instrument known as a key or sounder to close a set of metal contacts and produce an audible electrical pulse. A short pause between consecutive pulses represented a dot, a longer pause between pulses represented a dash. Thus an operator receiving a message interpreted the pauses or spaces between the electrical pulses.

This unsophisticated (by modern standards) but effective concept was named *'telegraphy'*, drawn from two Greek words, *tele* meaning afar, and *grapho* I write.

Morse Code Alphabet
The International Morse Code Characters:

A	.-	N	-.	0	-----		
B	-...	O	---	1	.----		
C	-.-.	P	.--.	2	..---		
D	-..	Q	--.-	3	...--		
E	.	R	.-.	4	....-		
F	..-.	S	...	5	.....		
G	--.	T	-	6	-....		
H	....	U	..-	7	--...		
I	..	V	...-	8	---..		
J	.---	W	.--	9	----.		
K	-.-	X	-..-	Fullstop	.-.-.-		
L	.-..	Y	-.--	Comma	--..--		
M	--	Z	--..	Query	..--..		

Figure 4

The dots and dashes in combination were to be coded representations of letters, numbers, punctuation and words. Fundamental to the concept, the most commonly used letter, 'E', became a single dot. The second most common letter, 'T', was represented by a single dash. Numerous combinations of dots and dashes represented other letters etc., but no letter had a combination of more than four pulses. This alternative 'language' or code took some time to learn and practice, but eventually a skilled operator was to be able to manually send up to 30 words per minute, and just as quickly decode and write down an incoming message via this 'sound talk'.

Although it required a physical connection, (i.e. suspended wire), the invention of the electric telegraph in combination with Morse's Code, had revolutionized long distance communication in North America and Europe by about 1860. The first telegraph line to be erected in Australia was between Melbourne and Sandridge (now Port Melbourne) in 1854, coinciding with the discovery of gold in Victoria. Melbourne also had the distinction of hosting the first telephone operation in Australia in 1880. By 1858, other colonies were following Victoria's lead - Melbourne was linked to both Adelaide and Sydney, with a submarine cable laid to Tasmania in 1859. Two years later Brisbane was communicating with Sydney via the 'singing strings', as the telegraph lines were sometimes called.

Morse Code was so effective it was adopted internationally, and was subsequently adapted by the Italian inventor Marconi who made the first trans-Atlantic transmission in 1901 by Morse Code using his new 'wire-less telegraphy' or radio. The electronic transmission of the human voice had become a reality with the invention of the telephone by Alexander Bell in 1876. Despite these advances however, Morse Code continued to be employed in various fields of communication through to the mid 1900's, although the mechanical operation of a key by a person to send messages today is essentially an outdated practice consigned to history and hobbyists.

Figure 5
Telegraphist at her
keyboard c. 1920

Early Exploration in the North

In Far North Queensland up until that time, aboriginal people had been communicating with each other for thousands of years over long distances by using smoke signals and message sticks (although the latter didn't separate the message from the messenger). These methods may well have been employed to alert each other to the slow cumbersome arrival of strange white people with large unfamiliar animals hauling their possessions in curious conveyances on wheels - another new concept. The frontiers of European settlement were inexorably moving northwards following the earlier exploration of the region by Leichhardt and others.

A thousand miles of coastline stretched northwards from Brisbane to the top of Cape York. Early navigators had identified river mouths and possible protected anchorages along the Queensland coast. When Queensland was subdivided from New South Wales to become an autonomous colony in 1859, pressures of settlement and the compulsive need of

Figure 6   John Oxley Library. #66377
Surveyor / explorer
Augustus Charles Gregory c. 1870

those living in the Victorian era to investigate the commercial possibilities of the unknown saw the new colonial government encouraging exploration by land and by sea. There was an aggressive policy in place to attract immigrants from the United Kingdom with a subsidized passage, the sea voyage in those days taking about 6-8 weeks.

Blanks on the map of north Queensland had steadily diminished since early European explorers started to penetrate the interior, led by the redoubtable Ludwig Leichhardt. In 1844 / 45 he and his party successfully trekked from near Brisbane up through central eastern Queensland, across lower Cape York, around the Gulf of Carpentaria to Port Essington (near modern Darwin). During the period 1845-48, explorers Mitchell and Kennedy separately had investigated areas south of the Gulf and up through Cape York (the latter being speared to death by Aborigines; most of his party were also lost). The very capable A.C. Gregory in 1848 walked from the Victoria River in the Northern Territory across North Queensland to the east coast. These and other early explorers generally provided favourable reports of the grazing potential of large tracts of land through which they passed north of the Tropic of Capricorn.

In its efforts to traverse the continent from south to north and return, the Burke and Wills expedition of 1860 / 61 has variously been described as *'gallant and ennobling'*, *'tragic and futile'*, and *'a complete fiasco'*. Whatever one's view of history, by far the most positive outcome of this exercise was the huge areas of the north traversed and described by no fewer than five expeditions sent out from the north, south and east to search for the ill-fated B&W. To varying degrees the searchers (capable bushmen all, probably more capable in fact than the objects of their search) again made references to the vast areas of well watered grassland in central and northern Queensland, reports which quickly proved so alluring to pioneer pastoralists. What few realized of course was that coincidently (and probably unfortunately in the light of future settlement), the early Europeans who saw these 'Plains of Promise' passed through during unusually good seasons when there was little direct evidence of extremes of Wet or Dry.

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Plains of Promise

There was a flurry of activity throughout lower Cape York from the sea coasts to the east and west during the early 1860's. At that time in that region there appeared to be unlimited new grazing land available, potential markets were identified, there was no shortage of land-seekers and credit was readily available. In short, Queensland was in an expansive mood which saw many with great optimism and a minimum of hard information sally forth and take up large tracts of new land in preparation for establishing sheep and cattle herds. Often the stock arrived from the south before the owners had confirmed their landholdings. By 1865 there were an estimated 55,000 sheep in a broad arc around the south-east Gulf of Carpentaria, and a year later reports suggested there were over 85,000. Cattle numbers were probably somewhat less. Further to the east, large holdings were taken up in the drainage of the Burdekin River and adjacent streams flowing into the Pacific.

With settlement rampant, the need for access by sea became imperative. Being on the edge of a continental plate, the well-watered north east coast of Queensland is well indented and it was a relatively simple matter by the mid 1860's to establish the towns of Port Denison (Bowen), Townsville and Cardwell as sheltered ports to service the hinterland.

On the opposite side of Cape York however, the landscapes were broad, flat alluvial plains falling gently into a featureless coastline and muddy shallow estuaries. With applications current for 109 cattle runs in the Gulf region, the site of Burketown in the southern Gulf of Carpentaria was selected as a 'port' of entry about 40 miles upstream from the mouth of the Albert River in 1865. This elevated site was at that time assumed to be flood-proof. Leaving Sydney in May of that year, a small vessel named the '*Jacmel Packet*' owned by Robert Towns and Co. steamed slowly up the river in June to set up the new frontier township. On board there were materials to construct ' ... *a public house and store, also some needful articles such as flour, tea, slops, etc.*'

Figure 7 - Burketown c.1870   John Oxley Library #67336

Consequently the new town was a little rough and ready, being established by private enterprise with the construction of a shop and a pub being the first priority. By September there were about 40 residents in Burketown living in what was generally described as tents and humpies. However, prices of supplies were described as exorbitant, being beyond the resources of many, and for some time afterwards things didn't go quite according to plan.

Only shallow draught vessels could come up the Albert River, and the arrival of such vessels was infrequent. One was described as a rotten old tub which was generally overloaded with mostly substandard cargo including ' ... *flour sent up half rotten, and full of long maggots, the sugar black and tarry, the tea no better than gum leaves. Notwithstanding all these drawbacks, we were glad to get it, otherwise starve ...*'! On the return trip to Sydney, the wool and meat products despatched were often damaged in the leaky boat. This in combination with high freight charges

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made producers look for alternatives. There were none. It was too far to drive stock or carry freight by wagon across to the east coast.

Burketown was to suffer another blow. Disease, probably typhoid fever, settled on the small isolated community like a sinister cloak within a few years of its establishment. One report stated that of the 80-odd inhabitants, 66 were sick with the fever (likely caused by contaminated water and poor sanitation) and in total about 30 people died. There was no doctor, no hospital, no medicine (other than grog and 'purgatives'!). In desperation Police Magistrate and Lands Commissioner Landsborough evacuated most of the community to Sweers Island in the Gulf. The boiling-down and meat preserving works continued operations sporadically but with no civic structure or law and order, Burketown degenerated to a point where ' ...*drunkenness and violent crimes were commonplace, and so great has become the rowdyism that no person goes about the town without a revolver'*. By 1870 the place was abandoned and Burketown for some years after became a ghost town.

Sweers Island was also unsuitable as a port, the anticipated trade with markets in the East Indies, India and England had not eventuated, and a recession had begun which cut off credit and discouraged capital investment. The remoteness of the region was strongly reflected in a shortage of labour, high prices, infrequent shipping and inability to market produce. Investigations into alternative possible ports saw the establishment of Normanton about 58 river miles upstream on the Norman River, in the south-east corner of the Gulf of Carpentaria in 1867. It was not a perfect choice there was too little fresh water in the Dry, and too much of it in the Wet. Access to the 'port' saw only three to four feet of water in the river at times, and there were rocks in the channel. Nevertheless there were few other choices in the Gulf to facilitate the coming and going of freight and people by sea.

Alas within a decade the fabric of grand expectations began to unravel. Graziers were realizing a lot of country was unsuitable for sheep, largely because of the seed of the spear grass and other grasses rendered the wool unmanageable. So too the quality of some grasses was unsuitable for stock - indeed some native plants proved to be quite toxic to domestic animals. The '*blacks were bad'* and interracial strife was a constant source of aggravation. Drought had had a serious impact on 'dry' runs, and then during the Wet season of 1869 /70 rain fell almost continually for 10 weeks and there was massive flooding throughout the Gulf (the site of Burketown was completely under water), stock losses were huge and many properties were abandoned.
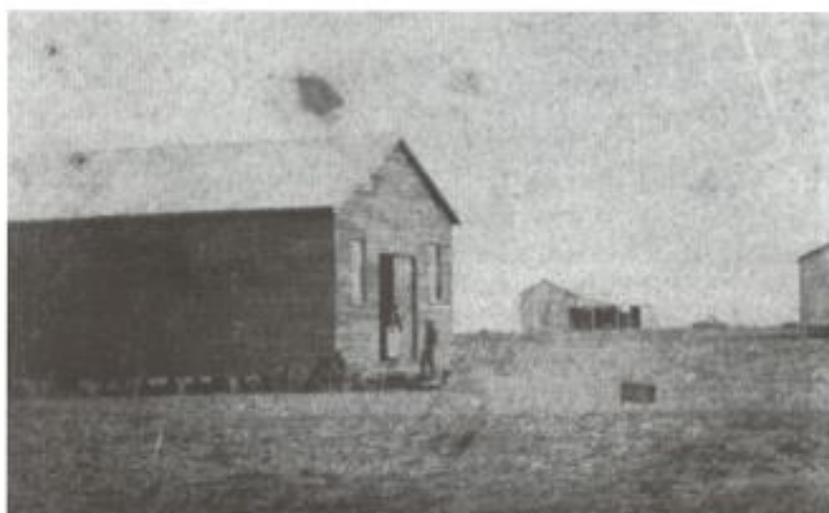
Figure 8
Bond Store and
other buildings
Sweers Island c. 1870

Swamps, Mosquitos and Mudflats

These impacts were not as severe further to the east. Those graziers within a reasonable distance of the developing ports on the east tropical coast had at least some local markets for their products, or were able to ship goods to and from larger centres of population further south. They didn't have the same labour problems and they had easier access to credit to develop their runs. The march of settlement creeping up the Queensland coast had seen the selection of Bowen (Port Denison) as a seaport in 1860 by G. E. Dalrymple.

This enterprising individual, the son of a Scottish nobleman, was to further distinguish himself in the new Kennedy District which was opened up for settlement by the Government of New South Wales a few weeks before Separation in 1859. Dalrymple and his party were aboard the schooner *H.M.S. Spitfire* which was also handed over to the new colony of Queensland to form the nucleus of its new navy. Thus the coast of Queensland was initially defended by one gallant 62ft. craft armed with '*one brass cannon between the two masts, a cask of gunpowder and a basket of cannon balls*'.

Following land expeditions, a few years later Dalrymple was responsible for leading another party by sea into Rockingham Bay behind the northern end of Hinchinbrook Island to establish a small settlement to be called Cardwell. The party was transported from Bowen in January 1864 in a small schooner named *Policeman*, towing a three ton cutter known as the *Heather Bell*. The 20 men were obliged to live on the open deck, exposed to the sun and rain, with the overloaded vessels carrying equipment, tools and supplies as well as 10 horses, 12 sheep, two goats, fowls and dogs. Following the traditions of the time, the new settlement was named after a British nobleman who was then Secretary of State for the Colonies. The name was conferred by Queensland's first Governor who in a true spirit of generosity had given his name to the new town of Bowen, located about 200 miles along an uninhabited coastline to the south.

One of the men in Dalrymple's party was named William Peters, and it was his wife Paulina who gave birth to the first recorded white child born in Cardwell, a boy who fittingly was named Cardwell. William Peters, who became a miner in the Irvinebank district in the late 1800's, had an aversion to footwear and became well known as Barefoot Peter.

Dalrymple was not wholly driven by altruism in opening up the coast to European settlement at the southern end of the Wet Tropics. He and several partners had selected and stocked a huge pastoral run they named the Vale of Herbert on the Herbert River over the ranges inland from the future site of Cardwell. In order to capitalize on their investment they needed an accessible seaport, and although Dalrymple had official sanction and support, he would be one of the first to profit from the opening of this new outpost. A gap in the ranges just south of Cardwell was to be named in his honour, and it provided a convenient but difficult access to the valley of the Herbert River for a short time until Townsville was established, this new centre being located roughly midway between Bowen and Cardwell. In addition to having a reasonable protected anchorage, the big advantage of Townsville was that a gap existed in the coastal escarpment in that vicinity which facilitated easy access to the interior, for rail as well as road.

Unlike Normanton and Burketown, Cardwell enjoyed adequate rainfall and fresh water for most of the year and arable soil was close at hand. There was a plentiful supply of millable timber, thus making life a little easier and relatively healthier for the early settlers. Dalrymple's new settlement initially consisted of tents and slab huts as clearings appeared in the forest and he took some satisfaction in seeing, ' ... *this silent wilderness of the north awakening suddenly to life and civilisation*'. The 'father' of Bowen and Cardwell was noted for his stamina, eloquence and grand

visions, attributes which perhaps stood him in good stead when he became the local Member for Kennedy in State Parliament some years later, at which time his huge electorate only had 150 voters! (Dalrymple in 1867 was actually president of the Northern Separation League which advocated autonomous government for North Queensland. At that time the rest of the State, with a population of less than 120,000, was virtually bankrupt).

Nevertheless, with swampy country around the new town the ever-present fevers took their toll, the isolation and poor communications were a challenge to development, as was the constant threat of hostility by the natives. Survivors of shipwrecks were routinely killed by the blacks, and in some instances eaten. For several more decades settlers in outlying districts were obliged to constantly have loaded firearms close at hand. Health services for the white community were inadequate or non-existent for many years.

Cardwell was entirely dependant on sea access for its link with the outside world, usually from the south - to the north there was over 500 miles of nothingness between the town and the tip of Cape York. Although the Port of Hinchinbrook at Cardwell was a declared Port of Entry, the waterfront saw a huge expanse of mud exposed at low tide. Thus sandflies joined with mosquitos to add to the discomfort of the locals. The problems associated with shipping in the shallow water of the bay was partially overcome by the construction of a 1000ft. jetty in 1872, and then the doubling of its length two years later.

This jetty had a chequered history. Evidently because of its substandard construction and perhaps poor maintenance, at times the masters of ships preferred to use lighters to land cargo on the beach at high tide. After being battered by a cyclone in 1890, the weakened end of the jetty collapsed during the unloading of the S.S. Palmer, tossing both cargo and passengers into the drink! This original jetty was opposite the old Court House - one report suggests it was opposite the modern school - wherever, it was well south of the modern jetty.

Unfortunately the building of the jetty in 1872 came just a little too late to be of much use in a major new project - the construction of an inland electric telegraph line.

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Figure 9   John Oxley Library #14465
George Elphinstone Dalrymple 1826-1876

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Gold Fever - Cable Fever

In 1869 the economy of the whole region changed significantly with the discovery of payable gold on the Gilbert River by geologist / grazier Richard Daintree, followed by other substantial finds in the Etheridge - Georgetown district in lower central Cape York in 1870. (Daintree, after whom the east coast river and township are named, was appointed as Queensland's first Agent General in London in 1872). Gold fever spread, climaxed by the discovery of the rich alluvial fields on the Palmer and Hodgkinson Rivers further to the north a few years later. Excluding Chinese and Aborigines, the population of north Queensland more than tripled in about 5 years.

Cardwell experienced wild fluctuations in its fortunes during this short period. Four years after the town's establishment, the discovery of gold on the Cape River in 1868 left only seven male adults in the town out of an overall population of 27. The following year the town was booming as it was the closest port to the new Gilbert River goldfield. In July 1869 alone, 14 ships unloaded 400 personnel on the beach, adventurers who packed up with expensive supplies and equipment and headed off over Dalrymple's Gap to the new El Dorado. Cardwell became the destination of the official gold escort, bringing the wealth back from the Gilbert and subsequently the Etheridge goldfields by coach or more likely by pack teams.

Figure 10 - Cardwell Nth. Qld. c. 1885   John Oxley Library #API-071-0001-0018

The escort originally came down Dalrymple's Gap to the coast south of Cardwell, then later it followed the new telegraph line track north of Cardwell until 1874. By that time Townsville had been established to service the fabulously wealthy Ravenswood / Charters Towers goldfield and the prosperity of Cardwell took another plunge. During the gold rush days, Cardwell was also the terminus of a fortnightly mail service to Georgetown (a distance of 238 miles) usually by packhorse, and this service continued thereafter for many years.

These events provided a backdrop for the development of further infrastructure across northern Queensland, but at least some of the impetus for the expansion of transport and communication came from a very different source. Fever of a different type was sweeping through southern Queensland - 'cable' fever! By early 1862 Brisbane was connected by electric telegraph to nearby centres, and construction had commenced on a northerly telegraph line heading for Rockhampton. Within three years of the first telegraph service commencing in Brisbane, the new colony boasted over 1,130 miles of telegraph line. This revolutionary new form of communication was immediately embraced by the population, and the Government quickly began receiving a return on its investment - money which it had borrowed from British banks. This despite the fact that the average cost of a telegram at that time was over five shillings, a lot of money in the 1860's.

In response to public and business interests, one of the first priorities of the new colony of Queensland following its separation from New South Wales was to establish its own telegraph network. Not only was this seen as imperative in reducing isolation and fostering further development in more remote parts of the state, attention was also focused on a potentially much greater reward. The State Electric Telegraph Department was established and one of the main duties of the new departmental head W.J. Cracknell was to oversee inter-colonial telegraph connections and the extensions of the network throughout the state. Additionally though, he had a close eye on a possible international connection.

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Underwater telegraph cable technology had been steadily improving. Early cables broke or 'leaked' (salt-water being an excellent conductor of electricity), being coated with tar and a rubber-like substance called gutta-percha which was derived from a tree from the East Indies. Nevertheless a British overseas cable company known as the British Australian Telegraph company (or B.A.T.) was investing in an undersea telegraph cable which was in the process of being laid on the seabed from Java - then part of the Dutch East Indies - towards the north Australian coastline in the mid 1860's. This cable stretched right back to England, and the dream of a direct communications link with the Mother Country was one which had preoccupied the Australian colonies for some time.

Queensland recognized the huge commercial potential in connecting to the international cable, and a plan was formulated to construct a telegraph line up the Queensland coast and then inland across the base of Cape York to the Gulf of Carpentaria, to link with the cable from abroad when it was brought ashore by the B.A.T. company.

With this in mind, in 1866 the Queensland Electric Telegraph Dept. superintendent Cracknell hired Fredrick Walker to lead an expedition in search of the best possible telegraph route from the Pacific coast north of Bowen, westward to the Albert River (Burketown) near the Gulf shore. A capable bushman, Walker had had an eventful career as a Commandant of Native Police and pastoralist, and in 1861 had been engaged to search for the lost Burke and Wills expedition (finding only their northernmost camp #119 on the Bynoe River near Burketown). In the mid 1860's, in order to help offset costs of linking to the international cable, Queensland had been offered financial support by the eastern Australian states including Tasmania as well as New Zealand (which was to be connected by sub-sea cable to Australia at Botany Bay in 1876).

Walker's party included seven Europeans, four Aboriginal trackers and 29 horses. One of the former was an employee of the Electric Telegraph department named Merrywether who was responsible for identifying and reporting on the suitability of trees en route which could be utilized as telegraph poles. Setting out initially from Bowen, after a difficult four month trek across from

Dalrymple - a small settlement inland from Townsville on the Burdekin River - the party arrived in Burketown towards the end of 1866. Most of the party were unwell, suffering from a range of fevers. About that time a boat had arrived in Burketown and all except the captain subsequently died from 'a typhoid'. Expedition leader Walker may have contracted this illness or it may have exacerbated his frail condition. Whatever the cause, he died at Floraville station on the Leichhardt River shortly after the party started their return trip. Today his grave is maintained and identified with a monument.

The second-in-charge, H.E. Young, assumed command and led the bedraggled group back eastward via an alternate route across the Flinders, Norman, Gilbert and Etheridge Rivers, returning to Cardwell in early February 1867. (Young was subsequently appointed officer-in-charge of the Townsville telegraph station, and was to die at an early age from injuries he sustained falling off a horse whilst repairing the telegraph line between Townsville and Bowen). Given that this return trip was carried out during the hot humid Wet season, the arduous nature of their work cannot be overstated. One of the Aboriginal trackers died of Gulf fever on the way, and Young himself was afflicted by 'blight' which rendered him almost blind.

Finally arriving in Cardwell, he and his party had travelled over 1300 miles in eight months and had successfully surveyed a possible route for the proposed telegraph line across lower Cape York from coast to coast. The way was now clear to commence construction.

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Figure 11   John Oxley Library #13924
Pastoralist / Police officer Frederick Walker
1820?-1866

Construction Begins

The telegraph link originating from Brisbane had reached Port Denison (Bowen) in Oct. 1866, and arrived in Townsville in March 1869. The citizens of Townsville argued their fair town would be a more suitable departure point for the proposed line but Cardwell eventually got the nod, the distance from there being significantly shorter to the Gulf than from Townsville. In the light of subsequent events, it is unfortunate the Townsville lobby didn't initially prevail. The line northwards from Townsville was constructed via a route inland from the modern town of Ingham, up the Herbert River valley and back onto the coastal plain south of Cardwell through Dalrymple Gap from west to east.

Telegraph line. Dalrymple Gap.

Figure 12   John Oxley Library #APO-022-0001-0040
Dalrymple Gap south of Cardwell c. 1881

The 101 mile link to Cardwell from Townsville was completed two days before the end of 1869, celebrated by free drinks for all at the Royal Hotel. A temporary telegraph office had been set up at the southern end of the town on the seafront overlooking Rockingham Bay, and the office was officially opened for business on January 3rd 1870, a date which, exactly two years later, marked the completion of the entire telegraph line between Cardwell and the Gulf. Five men had died on this coastal project, mainly from the notorious 'jungle fever'.

Cardwell then was finally connected with most of settled Australia with the arrival of the telegraph (nearly 1100 miles from Brisbane), but there was only a temporary cessation of work. Contracts were being negotiated for the construction of the proposed telegraph line from Cardwell westward to Normanton, the decision evidently having been made that Burketown, then almost a ghost town, was unsuitable for the honour of connecting Australia's telegraph system to that of Europe and the rest of the developed world. Normanton had been established as a settlement on a gravelly lateritic ridge well upstream on the Norman River from the Gulf of Carpentaria in 1867, at

a time when it was realized that neither Burketown nor Carnarvon on Sweers Island met the requirements as an administrative hub for commercial development in the Gulf. Normanton wasn't ideal either, having neither permanent fresh water nor a suitable salt-water anchorage, although a small centre was developed at the Norman River mouth for the latter purpose - a centre known today as Karumba.

Figure 13
Normanton c. 1892

John Oxley Library # 47597

The building of the new telegraph line was let by the Government in two private contracts, the first to progress generally westwards from Cardwell township up the Kennedy valley and over the Kirrama (Cardwell) Range towards the Etheridge River. The second contract was to commence at Normanton on the Gulf and work eastward to meet the other line on the Etheridge in central Cape York. In Cardwell, gangs consisting each of 40 men were assembling in early 1870 as drays loaded with the wires, insulators, materials, tools and supplies necessary for the Gulf telegraph line lurched through the town heading inland. Ships were standing out in Rockingham Bay, with lighters bringing further supplies ashore for the task ahead (the jetty at Cardwell wasn't to be constructed for another two years). The logistics of this operation were in parallel to events in the south-east Gulf, where boatloads of men, equipment, and supplies and even horses were being brought up the Norman River to Normanton from Brisbane via Torres Strait under the supervision of contractor Murfield.

The Cardwell contractor died shortly after construction commenced and the State Telegraph Department was compelled to take over, under the supervision of engineer A.C. McMillan. Despite this mishap and the difficulty of penetrating the coastal range inland from Cardwell (the same problem had knocked the socks off the Kennedy expedition a short distance to the north 20-odd years earlier), by the end of 1870, 26 miles of bush had been cleared westward, 17 miles of posts had been erected and 14 miles of wire had been fixed. Posts were cut from available hardwoods, usually bloodwoods and ironbarks, found locally along the route. There didn't appear to be any shortage of labour, and Cardwell was prospering, at least until 1873 when the town was again drained of able-bodied men who went to the Palmer River to dig gold, but by then the telegraph line was fully operational.

Two Ends Towards the Middle

The work was difficult and fraught with hazards. By taking the shortest route inland from Cardwell, it was necessary to negotiate steep inclines and traverse difficult terrain which was heavily timbered in places with patches of dense rainforest. A map outlining the route of the new telegraph line dated 1872 simply observes ' *Dense Scrub 3000ft* ' in this area, underscoring the horrors on the ground. A rough wagon track was constructed loosely following the line route and horse and bullock teams laboured up the steep inclines. Where wagons couldn't go, tools, equipment and supplies had to be carried by hand or on horseback. Poles and cables were dragged into place by small horse teams. In the thick scrubs, the notorious stinging tree was a constant threat to horses and men alike, as were snakes and biting insects including leeches.

During the Dry season, water was often poor quality and in short supply. In the hot humid Wet season, at times the whole country was saturated and flooded creeks had to be crossed. The ever-present fevers afflicted many and what medication was available was largely ineffective. In addition there was the constant need to be on guard against potentially hostile natives. As a result of these hardships, five men died during the construction of the inland telegraph line. Many years later during the construction of the north coast railway, a work gang unearthed some human bones in the vicinity of what became known as Dead Man's Gully, possibly the remains of deceased telegraph line workers. As Dead Man's Gully is south of Cardwell though, these remains could more likely have been those of the workers who died during the construction of the coastal line from Townsville.

Once the coastal ranges were crossed, the country became more open and undulating and progress was generally good. The site of the first repeater station was selected at Cashmere, a pretty place on the middle Herbert River just above the gorge, about 52 miles distant from Cardwell along the bridle track which quickly developed along the telegraph line route. A Police Barracks was also established at Cashmere. It seems the construction of the Cashmere repeater station and

Figure 14
Cardwell from jetty c. 1885

John Oxley Library #API-071-0001-0017

the next station along the line at Junction Creek were let under a separate contract, and work on these buildings may well have been under way before the line construction crews arrived. It is unknown why the place was called Cashmere. The name however is an archaic spelling of Kashmir, so maybe some parallels were identified between the idyllic climate and scenery of Kashmir, and the cooler moist open forests of the Cardwell hinterland.

Construction materials for the line were brought around through Dalrymple Gap via an easier circuitous route to the south via Lake Emma and Glendhu in the headwaters of the Burdekin River. The procession of drays and wagons branched off this track in various places to head north and dump their loadings at strategic places along the surveyed line. Work gangs were stationed at temporary bush camps, accommodated in tents and they literally lived on the job with the camps moving periodically as the work progressed. The logistics of such an undertaking must have been formidable, although communications should not have been a problem as we can assume there was a mobile field telegraph operating almost continuously at the head of the wire. Altogether, not including the end stations, there were about 15 camp sites along the Cardwell to Etheridge / Georgetown section.

A survey party would have led the way, identifying the best route. Following along the blazed tree line, each gang had a specialized task, e.g. clearing the alignment one chain wide (approx. 20 metres), selecting, cutting and hauling poles, digging holes and erecting poles, stringing the wire, etc. The poles were erected roughly about 80-90 yards apart, and each pole had to be 20 feet long, 10 inches in diameter at the base and needed to be sunk four feet into the ground. In the drier country, native cyprus pine was used for poles in preference to the usual eucalypt timbers. There were cattle, bullocks, horses, harness and wagons to attend to, and innumerable chores associated with catering such as food preparation and storage, the slaughtering of beasts, collection of firewood, carrying of water, etc. Blacksmiths no doubt were in attendance to shoe horses and to maintain tools etc. Rates of pay probably averaged about one pound per week all found, i.e. food and accommodation were provided by the contractor. It is interesting to contemplate if an alcohol ration was provided. Workers on railway constructions during that period were often described as 'strangers to sobriety'!

Figure 15
Mt. Surprise Station - 1885

John Oxley Library # 55047

McMillans men moved ahead of schedule as about 30 miles had been shaved off Young's earlier route by a shortcut identified north of Mt. Lang in the headwaters of the Burdekin River. From Cashmere heading westward, the next repeater station was at Junction Creek (also then known as 'Cassadys', the family name of local graziers), which was to be subsequently moved a short distance to a site close to the pioneering cattle property of Mt. Surprise station. The third repeater station heading west was built at Georgetown (named after popular gold warden and magistrate Howard St. George) which was to become the administrative centre for the Etheridge region in lower central Cape York.

Prior to the discovery of gold there, the repeater station at that site seemed to have been known simply as 'the Etheridge' after the river in that locality, which in turn was named after an overlander who had driven cattle through the district some years earlier. Subsequently the region around Georgetown became known as ' The Etheridge', a term which still applies today. The telegraph line from the east reached Georgetown in October 1871. Just a few months later in January 1872, at a celebration marking the opening of the first public gold crushing plant in town, Gold Commissioner St. George told the assembly that 14 months earlier there were only two men working the first gold show in that locality. Now, he noted incredulously, *' I ride through the streets of your town and observe your crowded hotels, flourishing stores and a happy prosperous population'.*

The buildings at the repeater stations were constructed from local pit-sawn timber where suitable trees were available, as well as prefabricated sections transported by wagons from the coast by circuitous routes often well removed from the actual telegraph line route. Once liveable, the repeater stations were no doubt manned and quickly became operational, a happy development which facilitated the ongoing construction of the line and reduced the sense of isolation.

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The construction crews working on the Normanton to Etheridge section however had to contend with major difficulties. In addition to the problems coping with extreme seasonal fluctuations in rainfall, it quickly became apparent that there was little suitable timber on the Gulf plains for telegraph poles. Nor was there timber or stone for the construction of the repeater stations which were to be located at - from west to east - Normanton, Creen Creek and Gilbert River.

Creen Creek (originally known as Carron Creek, is now identified on modern maps as Carron River) appears to have been named after the first Telegraph Inspector on that line, and the Gilbert so named after the naturalist speared to death during Leichhardt's expedition around the lower Gulf in 1845. The name Carron was possibly conferred on this watercourse by explorer Leichhardt during the same expedition, in recognition of fellow botanist William Carron who was destined to be one of the few survivors of the ill-fated Kennedy expedition on the other side of Cape York just a few years later in 1848.

Most of the repeater station buildings had to be almost completely prefabricated in Brisbane and shipped around to the Gulf, then laboriously transported inland by bullock wagon and finally erected. Contractor Murfield's men toiled variously in an easterly or westerly direction on their section between the Etheridge and the Gulf, depending on the availability and the need of timber or metal poles. In all, there were 24 work camps along the line between Normanton and Georgetown.

Many timber poles also had to be shipped from the east coast, and other supplies and stores arrived in the same manner by sea. Galvanized iron Oppenheimer telegraph poles 24 feet long had to be ordered from England (although they evidently were manufactured in Germany) and this led to further delays. These same poles were to be used in places on the South Australian OTL, and also to be employed later on the Cape York telegraph line. Extra large timber or metal poles would have been required to take the strain of long wires spanning the Gulf rivers such as the Gilbert and Etheridge which in places are over 200m wide.

The route between Normanton and Norman Mouth was a circuitous one, skirting around the mangroves and mudflats first north from the town and then west to the river mouth. Salt water crocodiles, at that time known as 'alligators', were an ever-present threat. At the Normanton wharf on one occasion during the unloading of a boat belonging to R. Towns and Co., a Kanaka had his leg grabbed by a crocodile. The man desperately held onto a mangrove while his workmates frantically beat the reptile with whatever was at hand. The crocodile eventually let go, but the unfortunate victim subsequently died of blood loss.

When finally completed, the western section of the line was to have timber poles for 85 miles and iron poles for the remaining 130 miles. Notwithstanding the delays, the whole of the line

from Cardwell to Normanton was finally operational on 3rd January 1872, exactly two years after the telegraph arrived in Cardwell from the south. The first message transmitted from the Normanton end had no heroic or classical overtones - it was simply a dry reference to the weather and the ships at anchor.

The construction crews had done their job. The tiny settlement at the Norman River mouth (known originally as Carpentaria, then Kimberley, then variously as Bay Station or Norman Mouth, and then subsequently as modern Karumba), was ready to connect to the long-awaited international cable, but where was it?

....
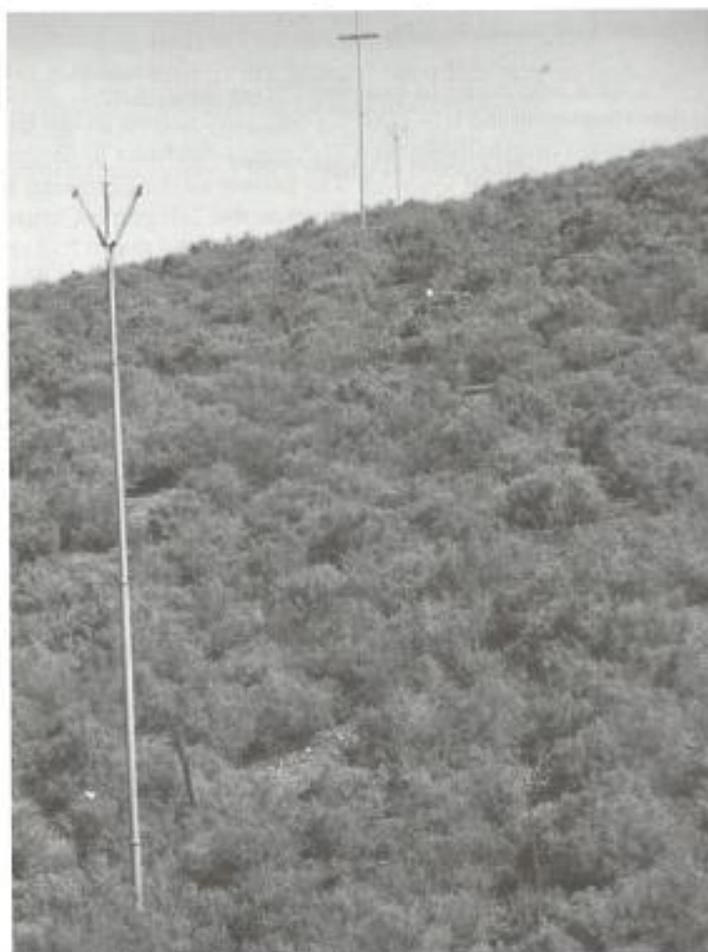
Figure 16
Oppenheimer poles on the former O.T.L.
still standing in 2008 north of Port Augusta S.A.

Intrigue and Interstate Rivalry

As early as 1866 (the same year that the first successful trans Atlantic telegraph cable had been laid) the colony of South Australia had refused to co-operate with Queensland to link with England via the forthcoming overseas cable, arguing that the cable should come ashore at Port Darwin in their 'Northern Territory' and run overland south, rather than down through the Gulf of Carpentaria to Queensland. The colony of Western Australia too was looking at a line extending half way up the W.A. coast and then diverging north-west underwater to Timor / Java. As with differing railway gauges between the colonies, this lack of colonial co-operation from the modern perspective was most unfortunate, especially as the geographically large colonies had relatively small populations and impoverished treasuries.

Determined nevertheless to deny Queensland the international connection (and of course with an eye on the immense revenue that would be forthcoming), the South Australian government appointed Charles Todd, a capable and energetic surveyor / astronomer as Superintendent of Telegraphs to oversee the almost unthinkable. This was to be the construction of a telegraph line from south to north across the Australian continent from Adelaide (or more accurately from Port Augusta) to Port Darwin, a distance of about 2000 miles. At the relatively young age of 28, he was to be paid the impressive sum of four hundred pounds per year, a sum which reflected the truly awesome task ahead of him.

It is interesting to examine events leading up to this epic undertaking. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, in the late 1860's a company known as the British Australian Telegraph Company (B.A.T.) was originally formed to connect Australia to Singapore, the latter being already connected to England via what was known as the European and Eastern cable system. On 25th January 1870 an organization known as the Telegraph Construction and Maintenance Company officially informed the Governor of Queensland that it had received a contract from the B.A.T. company to construct ' ... *cables and land lines, to be laid between Singapore and Burketown in northern Australia'.*
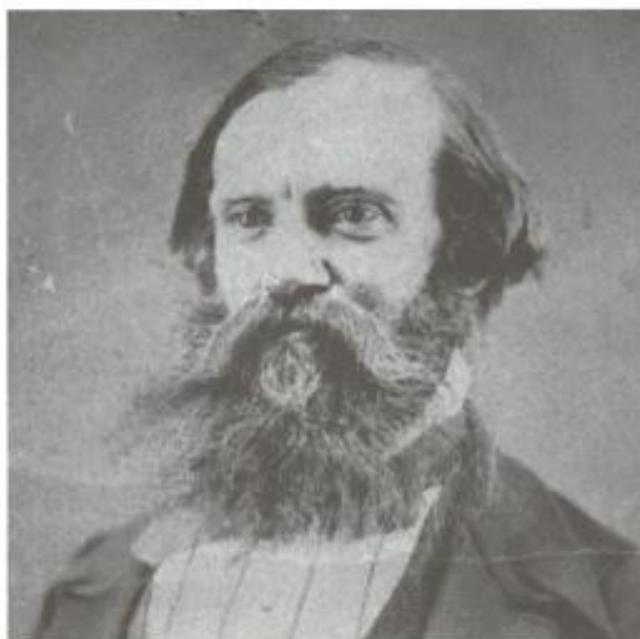
Figure 17
Explorer / surveyor J.M. Stuart

The plan at that time evidently was for the international cable to come ashore at Port Darwin and then run overland south-west to Burketown on the Gulf of Carpentaria, there to link with the planned Queensland line. As this proposal involved construction work both in South Australian territory as well as in Queensland, a representative from the B.A.T. / Telegraph Construction and Maintenance company visited Adelaide in early 1870 to discuss details. Whilst there however, the South Australians convinced him that they could save the construction company the expense of running a land line from Port Darwin to Burketown by building a telegraph line north-south across the continent to connect with the international cable at Port Darwin.

This route had been successfully traversed by the resolute explorer John Stewart in 1861 / 62 on his third attempt, an extraordinary feat which had eclipsed that of the much-publicised Burke and Wills. Barely able to walk, Stewart and his exhausted party coincidently arrived back in Adelaide after their continental crossing on the same day that the remains of Burke and Wills were buried with much pomp in Melbourne. Thus, unlike the latter, Stewart didn't achieve martyrdom by dying heroically out in the sticks although he very nearly succeeded. Rather he was looked upon by some as being politically incorrect and a drunkard, despite twice receiving honours from the Royal Geographical Society (the only person ever to do so other than David Livingstone), and he died ignominiously in London in 1866 aged 51.

With the route then open to the north, contracts were subsequently signed in Adelaide, funding of 120,000 pounds was approved for preliminary work on the new telegraph line, and three teams of workmen were quickly mobilized with mountains of equipment and supplies. Not only did the South Australians want to shut out Queensland, in their agreement with the B.A.T. company and its contractors they had given an undertaking to have the construction of their landline completed in time to meet the international cable when it was due to be brought ashore at Port Darwin in December 1871. This only gave the South Australians 18 months to build their line, and severe financial penalties of 70 pounds per day were to apply for failure to do so.

Things were happening fast in early 1870, both in Queensland as well as in South Australia. On the east coast the telegraph line had arrived in Cardwell from Brisbane in January, with plans in place to immediately start construction of the inland line to Normanton. Consequently, when the Queenslanders were advised by the B.A.T. company of the changes regarding South Australia and the international connection they naturally were outraged, indignantly claiming a breach of faith.

About this time the historical record is a little ambiguous, but what is clear though is that Queensland forged ahead with the construction of the Cardwell to Normanton telegraph line, evidently assuming they still had a valid contract with the B.A.T. company. This contract the Queenslanders believed obligated the B.A.T. company to bring an undersea cable ashore at the Norman River mouth in the south-east corner of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

Figure 18   John Oxley Library # 72543
Norman River mouth, formerly known as Kimberley c. 1935

Amid the controversy then, both states worked desperately to meet what they each saw as their obligations with the B.A.T. company. The South Australians were experiencing all sorts of problems, particularly in the north. Assistant Engineer R.C. Patterson had been sent around the continent with six ships carrying 200 men, 170 horses and 500 bullocks to Port Darwin immediately prior to the 1870-71 Wet season which arrived early. His expedition became hopelessly bogged down south of Port Darwin for an extended period and his men were under threat of starvation. Displaying heroic stamina, Patterson with two assistants struggled eastward across waterlogged country to the Roper River and frantically steered a tiny skiff down the flooded river.

Figure 19   National Archives of Australia
Telegraph line workers Roper River N.T. - 1872

From the mouth of the Roper, they then sailed eastward across the storm-tossed Gulf of Carpentaria, and then presumably followed up the Norman River to Normanton. From there they went overland eastward to the nearest operational station on the 'oppositions' telegraph line at Gilbert River to advise the South Australian Government in Adelaide of the desperate plight of the party and seek resupply. Thus Queensland's Gulf telegraph line probably saved the South Australian project from a serious misadventure. The race, and the political broadsides which were being fired between the two colonies, had all the elements of high drama. In the middle was B.A.T., a company which, one could argue, evidently had contrived to set one colony against the other in what would seem to be an unethical manner, to ensure an outcome which would be most favourable for itself.

During this period of intense activity another English undersea cable company entered the debate and offered to lay a cable from Port Darwin to the Norman River mouth when it became evident the B.A.T. company was unwilling to do so. Notwithstanding this and other options which were examined, in late 1871 when the B.A.T. cable finally came ashore at Port Darwin from Java, neither the South Australian telegraph line nor the Queensland line were completed, although the latter was to be operational within a month. It is ironic that the news of the successful arrival of the international cable at Port Darwin from Java was relayed to Australians via the Normanton telegraph station master. He received the news from a Government cutter which had arrived by sea from Port Darwin. Being one of the first telegrams he sent, the station master advised Brisbane of the news on 18th December 1871 and the following day national newspapers proudly informed their readers that Australia was now connected telegraphically to Europe, Asia and North America - almost!

Talk of penalties payable and intense negotiations as to what was going to happen next all fell asunder however when the B.A.T. cable broke somewhere between Java and Port Darwin within weeks of arriving on Australian soil. This gave the South Australians the opportunity they needed to finish their line to Port Darwin, while Queensland insisted that the B.A.T. company fulfil their original agreement to bring their underwater cable on to the Gulf. However when this cable became operational again four months later, London was connected to the rest of Australia via the Overland Telegraph Line from Port Darwin and Adelaide. Messages which had previously

Figure 20
First Telegraph Station at Darwin - 1872

National Archives of Australia

taken over 40 days by ship could now be delivered within 24 hours. With the first international message arriving in Adelaide on 22nd November 1872, the construction of the O.T.L. was rightly acclaimed as a monumental accomplishment, and Queensland's cause was brushed aside and forgotten amid the celebrations.

Six men had died working on the O.T.L., a remarkably low number considering the difficulties and hardships to which they were exposed. The line was 2000 miles long, built in three sections, and had 11 repeater stations along the way. In all, there were 36,000 poles. On average they were carted about eight miles to the route of the line - and the whole thing had cost 480,000 pounds, an extraordinary commitment by a relatively poor colony. By comparison, Queensland's Cardwell to Normanton telegraph line was 440 miles long, built in two sections and had six repeater stations, with about 8000 poles overall. Following the failure to connect with the international cable, these six repeater stations and the two end stations settled down to the steady business of handling local telegraphic traffic.

Had the allure of the possible international connection been absent, it is debatable whether a telegraph line would have been constructed inland from Cardwell in the early 1870's. Nevertheless, whereas previously mail had taken weeks and sometimes months to arrive, now private and business messages could be sent and received in an infinitely shorter period of time. This contributed significantly to the prosperity of the grazing industry and the small settlements which were gradually developing. The wildly speculative pastoral boom and subsequent bust of the 1860's laid the foundation for a more serious, cautious and long term re-establishment of grazing lands. Beef however was not just the only industry which was to benefit from improved communications. Gold and other minerals had been discovered in lower central Cape York before and during the construction of the Gulf telegraph line, and more golden ground lay waiting to be uncovered.

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Operational at Last

When the Cardwell to Normanton telegraph line became operational, the official inspection party consisting of the Superintendent of Telegraphs Cracknell and his construction engineer McMillan, rode the entire line from east to west and back again on horseback, taking two weeks either way in August / September 1871. Cracknell had ridden the entire route before to inspect the proposed alignment prior to construction. Their tracks and those of others provided a permanent route between centres, wheeled conveyances followed and communications and transport were well established in northern inland Queensland.

Curiously there was still a lingering but futile expectation of an international cable connection at the Norman River mouth for quite some years afterwards. A map dated 1876 shows a dotted line heading out to sea from Kimberley (Norman Mouth) identified as ' *Proposed Cable from Kimberley to Singapore'*. There are other early references to a possible sub-sea cable to India. In fact most of the British colonies in South East Asia had been connected to the Motherland by 1870.

Between the two end stations at Norman River mouth and Cardwell, the repeater stations from east to west were Cashmere, Junction Creek, Georgetown, Gilbert River, Creen Creek and Normanton. With up to four male personnel based at each repeater station, plus occasional families, these stations became more than just a convenience for communication. As with the coaching inns of earlier times, they became islands of civilization and development surrounded by wilderness. Being centres for the handling of mail and other goods (the Queensland Postal and Telegraphic departments amalgamated in 1879, and just under a century later, in 1975 the federal PMG was split into Australia Post and Telecom), the telegraph stations each represented a social and commercial hub for their local district, especially those stations which stood in geographical isolation such as Cashmere, Gilbert River and Creen Creek.

The other stations were part of, or were to become part of established communities where law and order, health, banking and educational facilities etc. existed. An important demographic spin-off from the new telegraphic network was that the way was paved for women and children to venture into the new frontiers, following the example of the officers-in-charge of the larger telegraph stations who evidently were able to have their families with them. Further lessening the ' tyranny of distance ', Cobb and Co. established a regular coach service from Mareeba across to Normanton in 1882, the coach road in part following the telegraph line. Commerce flowed along the regional artery provided by the telegraph line, together with communication and transport.

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Coinciding with the commencement of telegraphic services, economic stability was tempered with gold fever which was sweeping throughout the northern districts. For a period of nearly a decade from about 1870, a gold find was reported and a rush started, then another find and another rush. A major copper deposit was identified at Einasleigh and gold was found near the junction of the Etheridge and Delaney Rivers, the modern site of Georgetown. In fact the first gold claim registered at Georgetown was named the Overland Telegraph Reef found in Nov. 1870, suggesting the builders of the telegraph line had just very recently walked over golden ground and sunk their poles into it. By 1872 there was a major influx of new arrivals from the south and the flow of gold seekers, including thousands of Chinese, became a flood with the discovery of the fabulously wealthy Palmer River goldfield further to the north in 1873. Reports of inter-racial strife became increasingly common.
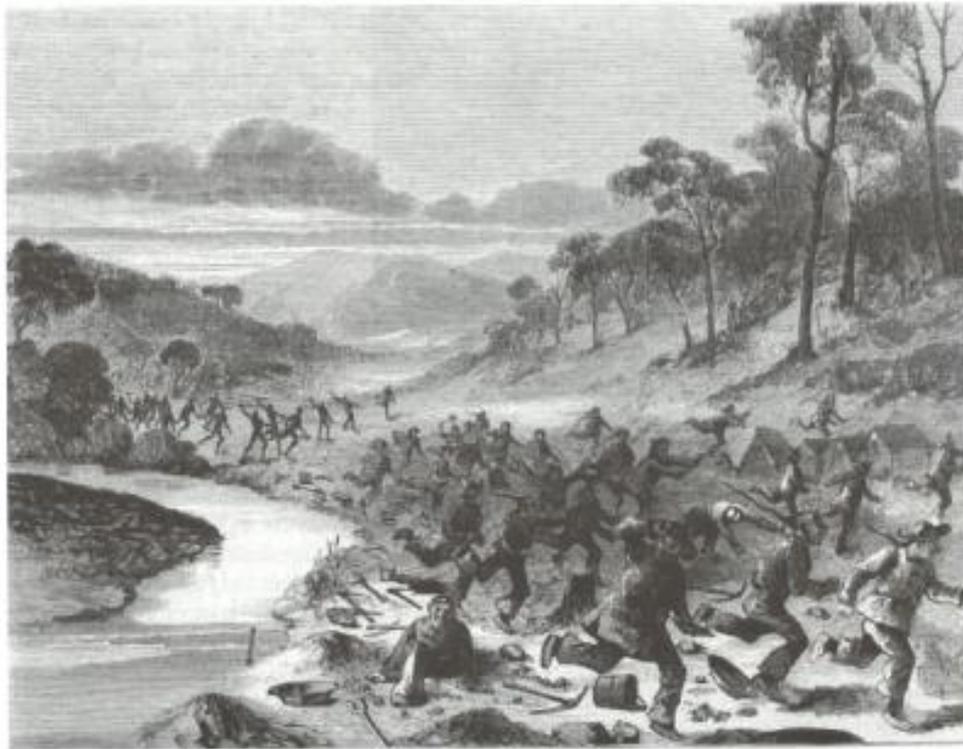
Figure 21
Aborigines attacking Chinese gold diggers Gilbert River - 1873

Georgetown, strategically located roughly midway between the east coast and the Gulf, was a hive of activity and boasted 14 hotels by 1872. Like Cardwell however, its fortunes waxed and waned in rapid response to the discovery of new goldfields in the region. Nevertheless administrative infrastructure was established in Georgetown which has served the district through to modern times. The early telegraph office there would have been a very busy place - one report suggests the original office was located on the present-day site of the caravan park near the municipal swimming pool. Some communications which have survived from that period provide some interesting insights, e.g. at one stage as a result of a public meeting, a telegram was sent to the Colonial Secretary complaining that the Chinese were co-habiting with the Blacks and diseases such as leprosy and syphilis were spreading rapidly, and urgent official intervention was requested. Police business in Croydon between the World Wars seems to have been largely focused on the disposition of individuals of mixed European, Chinese and Aboriginal blood.

Another special insight into this exciting period is provided by a telegram sent by a Sub Inspector Thomson to the Commissioner of Police from Georgetown on 6th September 1872. The telegram cost seven shillings and ten pence to send, quite a sizeable sum. It reads, " *Escort arrived today with one hundred pounds in signed notes for Georgetown and leaves for Gilberton with one hundred pounds in silver coin. Constable Wood was bitten by a snake at Glendhu on 28th ultimo and died same day. Escort detained at Glendhu five days searching for stray horses.* " It is curious that the news of the death of the unfortunate constable seems to rate equally with that of lost horses, and be almost incidental to the purpose of the trip, i.e. the official escort of money to the goldfields and the return of gold to the coast. Whether this escort originated from Cardwell and followed the route of the telegraph line is not recorded, but it is likely. Twenty three year old Constable Abraham Wood was buried at Glendhu station although his gravestone is in the Cardwell cemetery.

Figure 22   John Oxley Library # 147587
Gold Escort outside Bank of New South Wales - Georgetown 1901

In 1873 the staff of the Cashmere police barracks was reported to consist of one acting sub-inspector, one constable and six native troopers. A child was recorded as being born there in 1872, the daughter of gold escort John Bruce. This suggests families of the police, and possibly families of the adjoining telegraph office staff were in residence, creating quite a little community.

There seems to be no record of any other misadventure with the gold escorts from this period. In the event of a hold-up, the police escorts were under instructions to immediately shoot dead the animal or animals carrying or hauling the booty, thus making it more difficult for the villains to make off with the gold - and then and only then were they to defend themselves! Larger consignments of money and gold, sometimes worth up to 15,000 pounds, were usually carried by coach attended by as many as 15 troopers and others in support. A standard coach could carry up to one ton weight. The cost of these escorts were partially offset by a charge of up to two shillings and sixpence per ounce levied on the miners by the post office and banks, a levy which was strongly resented by the miners who sometimes took their gold as far as Charters Towers to sell, in order to avoid paying the levy.

Figure 23   John Oxley Library # 17074
Gold Escort at Georgetown - 1901

Graziers had a ready outlet for their meat on the Palmer River. In 1874 cattle were attracting up to 10-12 pounds per head, a sum previously considered inconceivable. This in turn drove up the cost of stocking new runs, and cattle were being brought into the region from as far away as central Queensland. The price of sheep and wool similarly escalated. The economy of the region prospered and the operation of the telegraph line and repeater stations became even more important during the 1870's. However, the prosperity was not to last. Alluvial gold mining quickly gave way to reefing which in some areas endured for several decades, but generally the population of lower Cape York dwindled following the boom of the 1870's.

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That was until the mid 1880's when workers on Croydon Downs station noticed gold in outcropping quartz veins, and in a very short time another goldfield was opened at a place soon to be known as Croydon. The new boom town was located conveniently about midway between Georgetown and Normanton, and about 20 miles south-east of the Creen Creek telegraph station. The population of Croydon rocketed to a peak of over 6000 around 1890, and the prosperity of the place was paralleled by optimism which saw the construction of a 90 mile long railway from Normanton to Croydon between 1889-91. Grand buildings appeared in both Normanton and Croydon and there initially was plenty of capital to develop the gold-bearing reefs with machinery and infrastructure.

It is very likely that Croydon would have been linked to the Gulf telegraph in the late 1880's via a branch line diverging between Creen Creek and Gilbert River stations. The railway to Normanton, opened a few years later, ran generally parallel to but well south of the original telegraph line. It can be reasonably assumed that the new railway, and the new road beside it, would have facilitated the re-routing of the telegraph line southwards. Investigation of the historical record no doubt would clarify this matter. What is known is that in 1899 a telegraph office was opened in the satellite gold mining town of Golden Gate, a few miles west of Croydon on the railway to Normanton. On a modern topographic map, an alignment of what was probably the Golden Gate - Creen Creek telegraph line can be identified. It is not unreasonable to assume this was an interim arrangement, and Creen Creek was likely bypassed eventually by a direct link between Golden Gate and Normanton along the Croydon railway.

Figure 24   John Oxley Library #11288
Surveyors on the Normanton-Croydon railway c. 1890

By about 1910 most of the accessible gold had been worked out but Croydon endured, as did the railway connecting it to Normanton. The last steam train ran on the Normanton-Croydon line in 1927, thereafter rail motors continued carrying light freight and passengers. Being built largely of steel bridges and steel sleepers designed to go underwater and to be termite proof, the line is still operational today as the Gulflander tourist service. The boom years of mining were over by the time the Great War broke out in Europe in 1914, but nevertheless the foundations of white settlement in far North Queensland were firmly in place.

Frontier Life

By modern standards life certainly wasn't easy in the early days of the operation of the new telegraph line. The railway construction between Croydon and Normanton coincided with the opening of a telegraph line from Normanton to Burketown in 1886, and another line from Normanton 226 miles south to Cloncurry opened in 1889. Thus instead of being an international communications link, Normanton became the hub of a local network. However life certainly wasn't easy in the early days of the telegraph operation.

A vivid description of living and working on the Gulf is preserved in an address given by Mrs. T. Holder Cowl in 1907 to the Pioneer Club (in Brisbane?) regarding her experiences in Normanton from 1872 to 1875. Her husband was the first Officer-in-Charge of the Normanton telegraph station - he was subsequently appointed as the first officer-in-charge of the Cooktown telegraph office in 1875. They had departed by ship from Brisbane in mid 1871 with everything from needles and cotton to prefabricated household furnishings and a house as well as nine months supply of life's essentials and foodstuffs, including live chooks. Here is an extract from this address :-

" *Towards the end of the Wet seasons (in Normanton), the flour became very bad. It was necessary to pass it through a fine sieve to get rid of the maggots and weevils, before it could be used. At the last it would turn quite a greyish colour and bread made from it would not keep. It became sticky and ropey the second day. After the first Wet season we experienced, and before the arrival of the schooner with fresh supplies from Brisbane, everyone ran short of provisions. The store had sold out. We lent all we could from our stock, until at last our own supplies failed. The vessel was delayed. The flour ran out, then the rice, tapioca, sago, arrowroot, etc. There was not a bit of farinacious food of any kind in the settlement ; we were reduced to fish, flesh or fowl.*

How we looked and longed for the arrival of that schooner ... but it was many days before she arrived, and our longing for bread increased. Some teams (which were) bogged on the road to the Etheridge were supposed to have some flour. Men started to them and paid fabulous prices. At last the schooner arrived the joyful news was wired by the officer at the Bay Station - boats went down the river to her and brought back flour with them. We enjoyed scones that day. Some persons did not wait to cook, but mixed the flour in water and drank it.

There were severe floods again the next rainy season. The whole country was flooded ; the telegraph wires were deeply submerged in many places, and communication stopped. Once more we were cut off from the rest of the world. The mailman ceased to travel. Every effort to repair the wires failed, although my husband with his assistant and line repairer went out several times in a light, small portable tin boat, provided by the department for the purpose. In many places only the top of the telegraph poles were visible. The small stunted trees were swarming with reptiles and vermin of all sorts. When it was necessary to tie the boat to a tree, the least shaking of the branches caused snakes, rats, centipedes, etc. to fall in the boat. They travelled inland many miles to where the water ceased, only to find the country waist deep in bog.

The blacks were also very numerous and mischievous. Cast iron flanges were used at the foot of the iron telegraph poles to support them firmly in the ground. The blacks soon found out that pieces of iron broken off those flanges made much better tomahawks when ground down on stones than their primitive ones made out of flat stones. .... When the flanges were removed in such soft country, the poles fell. The wire was also taken by the blacks. They cut it into short lengths to make points for their spears. These iron materials were a source of wealth to them because they were able to barter them with their surrounding tribes throughout the country.

In the middle of the flood time the officer stationed at the mouth of the (Norman) river reported he and his men all laid up with fever. The blacks had camped a few miles away and already stolen all his fowls and pig. The latter came back, but the men were all too ill and weak to go after the fowls. Next day matters were worse, the blacks had killed a horse, were round the station all night and the men hardly able to crawl about. This was the last news received. Nearly two days passed. The telegraph line had become interrupted.

Figure 25
Normanton Post Office (formerly Telegraph Office and Customs House) 1919

Dreading something serious, perhaps fatal, at the station, my husband decided to go down by water. He hired a Hong Kong light cedar-built boat from Messrs. Clifton and Alpin Bros. store and four men at a pound a day each and rations. They pulled up Wills Creek first, to where the telegraph line crossed it. Cut the wire, tested it and found it interrupted both sides of them. Then they went down the river to Walkers Creek, and did the same. There was still an interruption the bay side of them. Off they went again towards the mouth of the river, the flood waters sweeping the boat along at a great speed while they were going with it. When pulling up the Creek against it with all their strength on the four oars, they could not make more than a mile an hour progress. Thunderstorms with heavy showers prevailed all the time. They were cold and drenched to the skin, then broiled and steamed in the sun alternately. At night they tied up the boat to the top of the mangroves. The mangroves alone marked the course of the river and creeks. The whole country was under water on either side.

Soon after entering the river again from Walkers Creek, some black objects were seen floating quietly in the water near the opposite bank. At first they were thought to be logs of wood drifting. Suddenly two disappeared, and before it was realized they could be alligators an immense one rose up beside the boat, smashed an oar in two and placed its head on the boat amidships. Its weight caused the boat almost to capsize, the water rushed in, all hands leaned over to the other side to steady it and escape the monster. Two well directed rifle bullets, one into its mouth and the other into one of its eyes, caused it to slip off. They had a very narrow escape. The alligators followed them for a long distance but did not attack them again.

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The boat arrived at the mouth of the river on the fourth night. Not wishing to be shot at by the station people if they ventured near without warning, they 'cooeed' some time. Lights then appeared and shots were fired. A nice welcome was it not, after all the hardships my husband and his men has gone through? The latter fired in return, so the inmates then knew white men were hailing. Warm greetings were soon after exchanged, supper prepared, and explanations given. Nothing serious had happened. Attempts had been made to repair the line. The station men were recovering. Medicines were given to help them. After a nights good rest a start was made back to Normanton. They returned after six days absence. The poor men were prostrated with diarrhoea and fever, almost blind with blight, and covered with boils."

Mrs Cowl also described seasonal aspects of life from the woman's perspective, e.g. ...' during summer there was first the intense furnace heat ... followed later by the boiling vapour heat, with a myriad of insects .... The mosquitoes at night were really awful. We were compelled to take refuge under a large curtain made of ordinary dress muslin suspended from the ceiling ; long enough to lie a couple of feet on the floor, and large enough to go round the table with half a dozen people sitting there. Before sunset we would collect all we were likely to want during the evening. When ready we sat around the table and let down the curtain, and woe betide any person who afterwards attempted to come in or go out ....

Her little joys were described thus :- ' Time passed more pleasantly ... during the cool months when we were not laid up with fever. We had frequent jolly evenings, picnics, riding and driving parties, etc. ... Mr. West, the manager of Clifton and Aplin's store, introduced his bride to our community. I assure you I was overjoyed to welcome such gentlewomen, for hitherto I had been without the society of women in my own station and deprived of their companionship.'

Figure 26   National Library of Australia
Senior officers of Qld. Electrical Telegraph Office 1893
- Thomas Holder Cowl, inaugural officer-in-charge of Normanton
Telegraph Station 1872, middle row second from left

Figure 27
Children's Goat Escort for Governor's visit Georgetown - 1908

John Oxley Library # APO-028-01-0036

In Normanton though, as in Georgetown, the number of businesses and public servants and thus the stable population was to steadily grow in response to the requirements of the goldfields and the expansion of the grazing industry. As a consequence, the quality of life for the telegraph station personnel gradually improved, at least for those in the larger centres. Nevertheless there was no escaping the heat or the mozzies etc. which in summer continue to bother Gulf residents today, but to a much lesser degree. At least today they don't feel compelled to wear the heavy oppressive Victorian garb which in the early years was so terribly inappropriate for the tropical climate!

Mrs. Cowl's mention of the natives utilizing components of the telegraph line had an interesting parallel in the Etheridge. Evidently reports appeared in several newspapers, probably from the same period, i.e. early1870's, of the Aborigines ' ... *erecting a telegraph line of a quarter of a mile in length, parallel to the real line ... constructed from poles and spare coils of wire.*' Just why they would erect a section of phantom telegraph line remains something of a mystery. Maybe they recognized that the telegraph line was something important to the white man and its mysterious operation was somehow to his benefit, and they wanted to identify and take advantage of those material benefits, perhaps something akin to the notorious cargo cult which afflicted Pacific Islanders in later times.

During the first years of operation, the telegraph line and associated infrastructure was new and maintenance was minimal, notwithstanding floods, fire etc. However that scourge of timber in the tropics, the humble white ant or termite, soon was making its presence felt. Even hardwood telegraph poles were quickly attacked and constant inspections of the telegraph stations were necessary to prevent them literally being eaten. Even with the buildings standing on stumps capped with metal plates was no guarantee of immunity. In later years a visitor to Normanton reported that termites of ' *a gigantic species, over half an inch long, pallid and ugly* ' had chewed out a rear wall of the Post Office kitchen and had eaten a lead cable! In modern times, the Gulf termites have been known to eat through tractor tyres!

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Exploration Continues

When the operation of the Gulf telegraph line commenced in early 1872, inland Cape York immediately to the north of the line was still largely a blank on the map. In June 1872, experienced bushman/ cattleman / explorer William Hann was chosen by the Queensland Government to lead an expedition northwards from Firth's Mt. Surprise station with the object of ' ... *ascertaining, as far north as the 14th parallel of latitude,* (in line with modern Coen) *the character of the country and its mineral resources, with the view to future settlement and occupation.'* This he did in company with six companions, among them an Aboriginal, a geologist, a botanist and a surveyor.

In November that year, after a very productive and at times dramatic trip (e.g. getting tangled up in the impenetrable coastal rainforests for six days), they returned to Junction Creek telegraph station very close to where they had set out, and sent off a telegram to the Minister for Mines informing him of the safe return of the expedition. Hann's report contained references to extensive grazing lands and the discovery of traces of gold. Payable gold was defined as no less than one ounce of gold mined by one man per day.

They had come close to but just missed the wealth lying in the bed of the Palmer River and its tributaries. Building upon the geographical information brought back by Hann's expedition, respected explorer / prospector J.V. Mulligan set out northwards in June the following year with five offsiders, again from Firth's Mt. Surprise station. Unlike Hann, Mulligan was not especially interested in grazing lands.
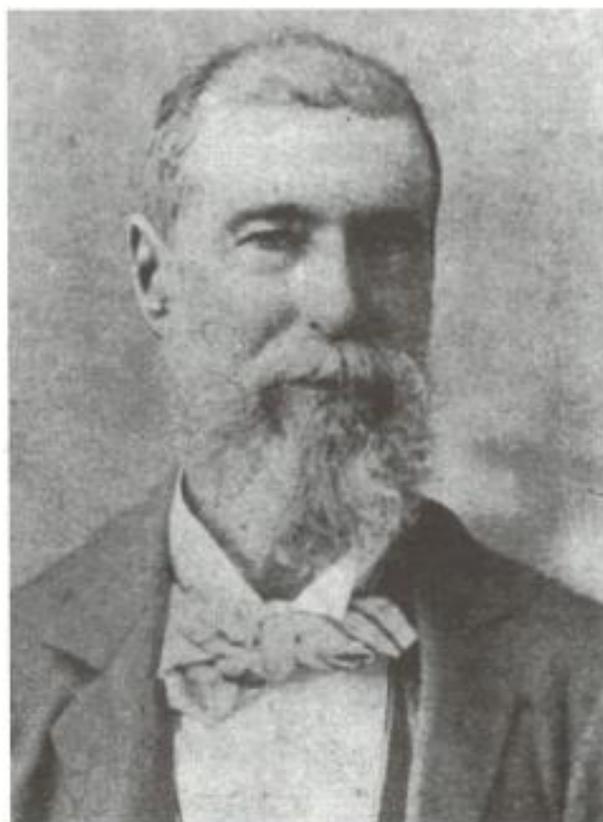
Figure 28   John Oxley Library # 1564
Explorer / prospector J.V. Mulligan - 1903

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He was focused on gold and he finally found it in fabulous quantities on the Palmer River. Returning with 102 ounces of the golden metal to Georgetown in early September 1873, again it was the wondrous electric telegraph which conveyed to the world the exciting news that was to start a rush of unprecedented proportions and transform far North Queensland. The initial rush saw hundreds of hopeful gold diggers set out from Georgetown accompanying Mulligan back along the telegraph line east to Junction Creek / Mt. Surprise before turning northwards towards the Palmer. Upon receipt of the news, the Cardwell telegraph office reported that half the town's population had immediately left for the new field.

Mulligan was more interested in discovering rather than exploiting, no doubt spurred on the offer by the Government of a reward of 1000 pounds for the discovery of another payable goldfield. So, in May 1874 he again set out with five mates, this time from Cooktown, to further investigate possible mineralization in central and lower Cape York. At one spot whilst prospecting in broad daylight, they had to withstand a determined attack from local tribesmen which saw three of the Europeans sustain spear wounds. Not for the first time, the north Queensland bush resounded to the blast of Snider rifles. This expedition had limited success, but anxious to further explore and being re-equipped with a government grant of 500 pounds, he and his mates set off again from Cooktown in April 1875.

In June, Mulligan sent a brief report of his expedition to Brisbane via the Junction Creek telegraph station (he had just found good indications of tin near the future site of Herberton) before heading back northwards towards Cooktown, making a note along the way of the rapid progress he saw of the Cape York telegraph line under construction. Within eight months Mulligan and others had found the rich Hodgkinson goldfield, and the small tent towns which quickly sprang up were soon to be linked with the Cape York line.

Thus both telegraph lines at the base of Cape York peninsula in the 1870's featured in this exciting phase of European exploration and settlement. In most other parts of Australia, communication networks were developed following European settlement - in the far north it could be said that the reverse was the case!

Figure 29   National Library of Australia
Inside Junction Creek Telegraph Station c. 1890

Figure 30
Sketch of main street of Georgetown looking north c.1870
Etheridge River extreme right

National Library of Australia

Figure 31

Main Street
Georgetown 1904 looking
north. Post & Telegraph Office
lower left, Etheridge River
extreme right

John Oxley Library #47340

Early Days of Operation

Women rarely seem to have played any official role in the telegraph operations in the early days, although in later years there are reports of wives taking over the telegraphic duties when their menfolk were obliged to go out to repair the lines. As we have already noted, the regular supply of quality food was a rare luxury. However, some stations had a small herd of cattle or more commonly goats for fresh milk and meat, and fresh fruit and vegetables on occasions were grown by the station staff or Chinese gardeners. Some communities such as Georgetown were almost wholly supplied by Chinese market gardeners, although prices were sometimes considered exorbitant, e.g. one shilling for a poor cabbage or a handful of stunted carrots. In the early days, the more remote telegraph stations were resupplied with basics like rice, flour, tea, sugar, tobacco, tin stuffs etc. only twice a year, just after the Wet season and then about seven months later just before the next Wet season. Mail services initially were infrequent. Illustrated mail order catalogues were highly prized, such as those from universal providers (the forerunners of modern department stores) like Anthony Hordern & Sons, and F. Lassetter & Co.

The linesmen and operators were required to be competent horsemen and bushmen, and useful with firearms both to secure wildlife such as birds for the cooking pot, and to be able to defend themselves and their station from attack by the natives. Kangaroos and wallabies were shot to feed the station dogs which in turn were important for guarding against attack. Occasional reports were appearing in 1872 in newspapers as far afield as Brisbane, of Gulf telegraph personnel being obliged to ward off hostilities by natives who were regularly spearing horses and cattle and stealing anything that wasn't locked up. On one occasion they stole drying underwear belonging to the wife of an operator-in-charge, and the next day the Native Mounted Police apprehended the culprits, both male and female, happily sporting the apparel in a manner probably not envisaged by sophisticated society!

Figure 32   National Archives of Australia
Musgrave Telegraph Station Cape York - 1896, note defensive turret on right and left

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Some telegraph stations at that time were designed with firing slots in the walls through which the defenders could shoot without being speared or clubbed. Indeed some of the Cape York telegraph stations, generally erected about 10-15 years later, had quite sophisticated fortress-like galvanized iron structures with angled turrets protruding from two diagonal corners of the building, from which defenders could shoot at attacking natives (*see photo previous page*).

It is interesting to note that the telegraph employees supplemented their basic fare of beef with wildlife, while the Aborigines supplemented their basic fare of wildlife with the meat of the white man's horses and cattle, goats, pigs and chickens. Sometimes horses were speared simply for their metal shoes which were fashioned into weapons or tools.

In late 1873 the entire population of the frontier gold mining town of Gilberton (south of Georgetown), numbering about 100, completely abandoned the town and burnt most of what they had to leave behind in the face of persistent attacks by the natives during which several whites were killed. This appears to be one of the very few instances in Australian history where well organized Aborigines successfully laid a whole town under siege. The incident and the siege of the Gilbert River telegraph station was reported in the Rockhampton Bulletin, together with some interesting editorial comment, in early February 1874 :-

Georgetown Thursday evening February 12th.

' *The blacks retired from besieging the Gilbert River telegraph station upon arrival of assistance. They then encamped at the opposite side of the river. A telegram which has just come to hand from the Gilbert River telegraph station reports that the station is beleaguered by blacks in great numbers, and that the place has been barricaded against assault.*

The station, which is built of sawn timber and roofed with shingles, is garrisoned by a telegraph master and his wife, and one assistant, one musket being the only firearm they possess, so that it is impossible that the place can hold out long.

Two black troopers and two volunteers, under charge of Sergeant Griffin, are just leaving for the scene of action, and as was the case when the blacks attacked Gilberton, the police are begging everywhere for the loan of firearms, without being able to obtain any of the right sort.

A great error has been committed in some quarter with reference to the arming of the police. Large crowds of blacks are reported to be within ten miles of George Town, and it is imperatively necessary that the Government should immediately forward here two or three dozen heavy breech-loaders and plenty of ammunition for the use of the inhabitants in an emergency like the present one.

The same newspaper went on to report that a large number of people are preparing to leave Georgetown for the Palmer River, noting that 1100 diggers are already there and another 3000 are en route. The report ends with the cryptic sentence :- ' *The blacks are quiet'.*

In some areas natives were considered potentially 'troublesome' up until about 1890, by which time many hundreds had died from European introduced diseases such as venereal disease, measles, influenza, etc., and the remainder had become fringe dwellers, clustered around grazing properties or small white settlements and becoming dependant on employment and handouts. They had been dispossessed of their tribal lands and waters, and thus their sometime spirited defence of their country in the face of the white invasion was dissipated. There were efforts by some Europeans to deal peacefully with the clash of cultures, sometimes with marked success.

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However other whites were not always benevolent, and tales of abuse and exploitation were common. This confrontational approach to the blacks resisting the white invasion was manifested in the Native Mounted Police. This organization was a branch of the police force usually comprising a white officer in charge of what was sometimes seen as poorly-trained Aboriginal men from distant places (they never served in their own tribal territory) who usually had little empathy for their brethren. Blacks who were seen as troublesome were 'dispersed' by the Mounted Police, and alleged offenders sometimes brought before a white court, no doubt a bewildering experience for them which further eroded their connection with the land.

Figure 33
Skirmish near Creen Creek N.Q. - 1876

State Library of Victoria

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Telegraph personnel became de facto medicos, ministering not only to their own health needs but that of others living nearby or passing through. An up-to-date medical kit was an essential part of frontier life. Accidents and injuries through misadventure were as common as various illnesses. Remedies of that time were varied and innovative. For instance snake bite was dealt with by the application of Condys Crystals in combination with a tourniquet and bleeding. There is a report of infection being treated with a poultice of linseed and port wine, and a child experiencing 'convulsions' was simply immersed in hot water. Another report describes that most dreaded of fevers, Typhoid, being treated with ' *digitalis and belladonna* '. No anaesthetic was available when broken bones had to be set. One report noted that a ringer with acute toothache plunged the red hot end of a length of fencing wire into the offending tooth! Child-bearing for women was looked upon with great trepidation, in the sure knowledge that it could be extraordinary painful and potentially fatal for both mother and child if things went wrong during the delivery.

Fortunately, in the absence of trained professionals in the flesh, the telegraph operators were in the best position to deal with medical emergencies, i.e. they were usually able to 'talk' with a doctor through their telegraph and in a relatively short time get advice and instructions, a forerunner of sorts of the future Royal Flying Doctor Service. Not just the Europeans took advantage of these frontier services. Natives came along for the white man's magic medicine, and after being given something innocuous, went away miraculously free of symptoms. A funny story is preserved of a linesman administering a concoction of salamoniac (a fluid in which the wet cells of a battery were immersed to provide electric power for the telegraph line) combined with Epsom salts to natives complaining of non-specific illness. Although administered in a very weak solution, the brew was a powerful purgative but the linesman never lost a patient and the natives seemed quite happy with a good clean out!

Figure 34   National Archives of Australia
Gilbert River police station, left, and Telegraph Office far right - 1901

Human tragedy was not uncommon. In 1872 the telegraph operator named Thomas McCullough at Creen Creek, about midway between Normanton and Gilbert River, had walked to the latter station with his assistant during the Wet season as they had run short of supplies. Returning on foot a fortnight later after the floods had partially subsided, McCullough developed a fever and was unable to attend to a break in the line towards Normanton. He sent his assistant Green who was unable to fix the fault and who returned to find McCullough on the floor speechless. Hearing Gilbert River station calling them next morning, Green carried McCullough to the Morse key to reply, but the operator died there shortly after. Green himself was too weak with fever to bury his boss, so incredibly he set out again to walk to Gilbert River, over 60 miles away, to convey the bad news. One wonders how he crossed the flooded Gilbert River to get to the telegraph station which was situated on a hill about a kilometre from the right bank (the locality today supports commercial mango plantations).

In the Gulf country during the Wet there were innumerable reports of the difficulty experienced traversing boggy country after flood rains. This is probably the reason the embattled McCullough and Green walked across country, as horses would have had difficulty with the soft ground conditions. One report from the Gulf described a pack horse having to be unloaded when it sank to its belly, and then having to be shot when after futile struggling the unfortunate beast was further swallowed in the bog with only its head showing above ground!

The demise of Thomas McCulloch has a humorous sequel. He was eventually buried at Creen Creek by his colleagues and after about 6 months, upon the request of his southern friends, Mc Cullough's remains were exhumed and packed in sand in a strong box which was marked as *'Telegraphic Material to be Returned'*. The box was taken to Normanton by team and the *'telegraphic material'* lay on the veranda of the house of the officer-in-charge of the telegraph station for six months awaiting shipment to Brisbane, the real contents known only to a select few! The remains of McCullough were eventually interred in Toowong cemetery in Brisbane. The hot humid Wet season was known as the fever season - in Normanton at one stage in the mid 1870's, so many people were dying of fever that shelving had to be taken out of the telegraph station to make coffins!

There is another postscript to the death of operator McCullough. His replacement at Creen Creek was a linesman named T.A. Gulliver who had been stationed on the Brisbane-Cardwell telegraph line inland from Mackay in early 1872. A cyclone had brought torrential rain and violent winds and, not surprisingly, the line had been broken so Gulliver had to go out in appalling weather to fix it. Swimming a flooded creek, his packhorse floundered in the rushing water and most of Gulliver's supplies were lost. Struggling ashore on his riding horse, he then stripped off, wrapping his clothes in a bundle, and continued on to the next creek where he was washed off his horse, losing his clothes. So he swam back to the bank he had just left, and spent the next three weeks there, naked with no gear or supplies, stranded between two flooded creeks and living only off bush tucker. A search by the Native Mounted Police proved unsuccessful so he was declared drowned. When the unfortunate Gulliver finally walked back to civilization weeks later, still naked and covered in insect bites, he had the unusual experience of reading his own obituary!
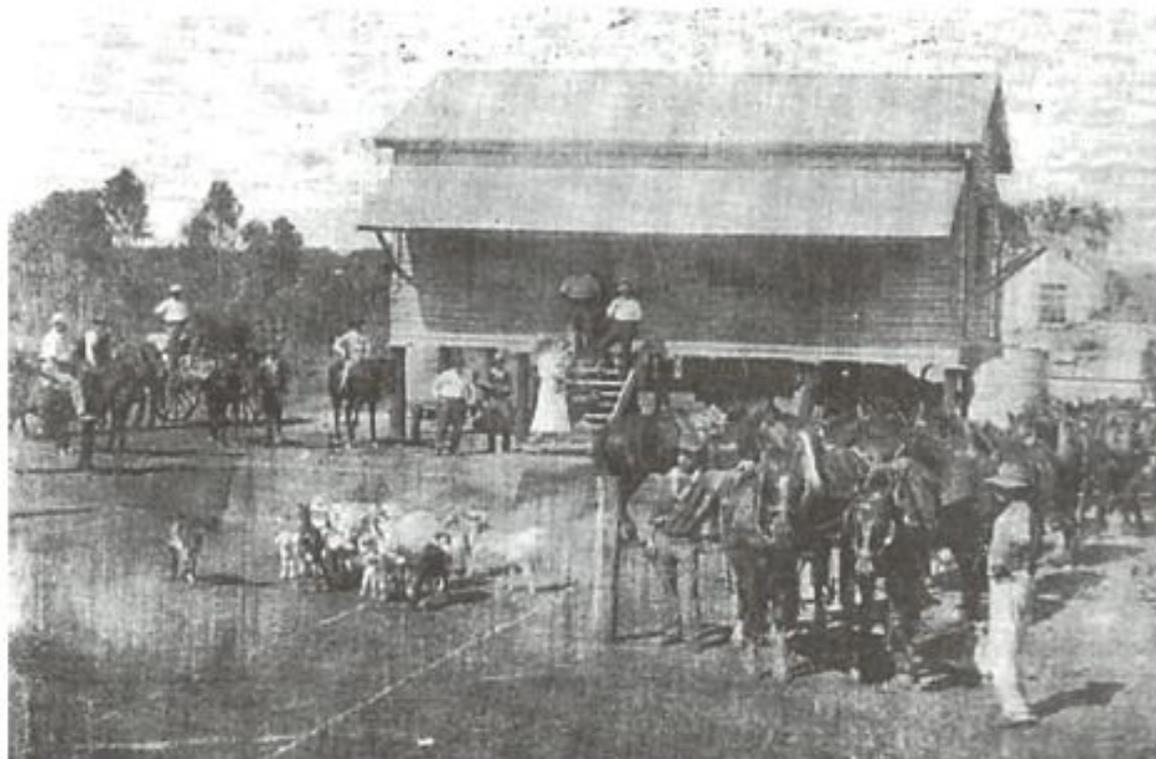
Figure 35
Telegraph Repair Gang leaving Junction Creek telegraph station 1906

John Oxley Library #2843

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Relics and the ruins at the Creen Creek station site today indicates there was a complex of buildings and infrastructure covering about three acres, beside what once no doubt was a deep and picturesque waterhole in the watercourse now known as the Carron River. The remains of an old horse-drawn plough suggests an effort to extract vegetables from the uninviting soil *(see insert below)*. The country though has no distant views and is uniformly flat and monotonous with low stunted timber, suggesting that mental resilience was an important attribute for the staff in dealing with the isolation.

Figure 36
Former Creen Creek telegraph station site - 2007

Figure 37
Creen Creek / Carron River, with former telegraph station site in centre background - 2007

The name of geographical features nearby along the old line route such as Two Mile Waterhole, Seven Mile Creek, Nine Mile Swamp etc. confirm the telegraph station was the focal point of that region over a 100 years ago. Downstream from the telegraph station on Creen Creek / Carron River there was a hotel at a site known as Foots Lagoon, the pub no doubt constructed after the track following the telegraph line became an established route for travellers moving east and west.

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Linesmen, Operators and Stations

As we have noted, the telegraph operators were competent in Morse Code and the operation of the key, opening and closing an electrical circuit with a spring-loaded switch to construct letters, words, sentences and numbers which were 'sound-read' by other operators. All messages were written down before being relayed along the line - the stations must have had a copious supply of writing paper and pencils. Telegrams to be delivered locally were handwritten and in later times typed on special forms. The operators were the senior members of the station staff. Their subordinates were linesmen whose job it was to patrol the telegraph line half way in both directions from their station towards adjoining stations.

It was the linesmen's responsibility to clear vegetation from under the lines, ensure the poles, wires and fittings were in good condition, and of course attend to breakages or 'leaks' as soon as possible after they occurred. Aboriginal assistants sometimes accompanied the linesmen on their lonely patrols. Telegraph operators were occasionally obliged to leave their keyboard and go out and repair the lines, especially in the earlier days. It does seem though that the linesmen weren't necessarily trained as operators, as exemplified in the previous chapter when a linesman in an emergency had to walk to the next station, leaving what was possibly a perfectly operational keyboard behind in his home station.

Figure 38
Telegraph linesmen in training c. 1900

As the timber telegraph poles and wires were higher than a man standing on the saddle of a horse, a clever but simple piece of equipment consisting of a short length of sturdy rope about 4 feet or 1200mm long was employed to climb the poles. Into one end was spliced a horse riding stirrup, whilst a sturdy metal hook was spliced into the other end. Wrapping the hook around the pole and securing it back on the rope, the hanging stirrup became a step. With weight on this step, the loop tightened around the pole and stopped it slipping down. At least two of these ropes were used together, one secured around the pole above or below the other to provide alternate steps for the linesman. Once at the top he looped a large leather waist belt around the pole to free both his hands to carry out the necessary work. Now quite rare, one of these climbing ropes was found in fairly recent times on a rubbish tip near Cardwell by a sharp-eyed individual who determined that it probably belonged to former post master, telegraph operator and linesman Tom Butler who together with his wife served in Cardwell from 1898 to 1902.

The climbing of the metal Oppenheimer poles would have been a different matter. The four sections of each pole were fastened together by a heavy metal band, perhaps secured by a special clamping tool or the application of heat, or maybe both. These bands though would not have offered a secure purchase for the linesman's boot, so it seems likely the maintenance personnel did carry a ladder which must have been about 13 feet or 4 metres long. Even then things could have been a bit tricky as the tapering poles even at ground level were no more than 4 inches or 100mm in diameter.

Little specific information seems to be available regarding the routine daily operations of the stations along the Cardwell - Normanton telegraph line, especially during the first 40 years of its operation. Aspects of logistics, technical skills, duty statements, rosters, the handling of money, hours worked, time off, rates of pay etc. are a little uncertain. However we can make some reasonable assumptions, based in part on the simultaneous operation of the Overland Telegraph Line between Adelaide and Darwin which has been well documented. The latter handled much more traffic of course, and was operational 24 hours per day.

Duty officers on the OTL were obliged to make detailed weather reports every 4 hours, and it is likely that weather reporting too was a regular function of the staff on the Cardwell to Normanton line. The accurate determination of time too was important, especially for navigational purposes for ships. At end stations on the coast, i.e. Cardwell and Norman Mouth, the operators in such places may well have had surveying skills to make the necessary celestial observations. Operators working on the OTL evidently were obliged to dress formally whilst on duty, but standards on the North Queensland line were likely to have been a little more casual, especially in the more remote stations in summer.
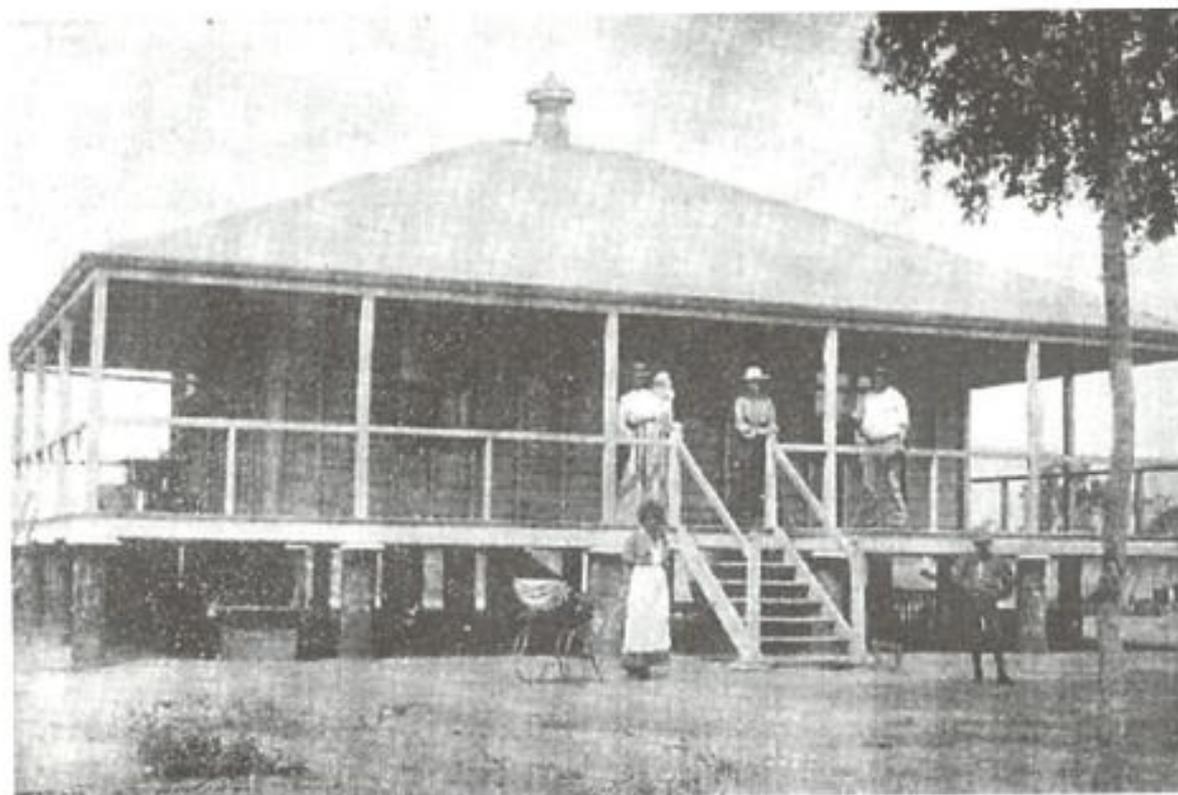

Figure 39   John Oxley Library #185813
Residence of officer-in-charge Junction Creek Telegraph Station early 1900's

Each telegraph station had its own call sign consisting of two letters , e.g. Junction Creek and later Mt. Surprise was CY. Usually dressed in Crimean shirt, moleskins and cabbage-tree hat, linesmen patrolled the lines with saddle and packhorses (sometimes even a bicycle). They were fortunate if their lines followed a teamster's or coach road, or in later times a railway. Telegraph poles were sometimes washed out during the Wet, or in the case of timber poles they were burnt in bush fires during the Dry. Termites often damaged the poles or ate the wooden insulator pins. Some poles were to be treated with arsenic to deter termites, and one wonders what effect this chemical had on the linesmen, especially if they were careless in its handling and application. Telegraph poles and wires were damaged by lightening strikes, although some poles had lightening rods. Trees and branches fell across the wires which, even if they didn't break, were sometimes earthed and the electric messages couldn't get through.

The power source for the electric impulses sent along the telegraph line came from heavy banks of batteries which were periodically recharged (with the addition of chemical solutions or new plates) or replaced as they decayed. Scores of these batteries were required to produce the necessary voltage. Insulated wires attached to the copper and zinc electrodes enabled all the cells to be connected together and an electric current to flow. The bank of batteries was housed either in the telegraph office or an adjacent shed. The regular maintenance of the batteries was of course crucial to the telegraph operation - there doesn't seem to be any record of the batteries being used for any other purposes, e.g. domestic lighting.

The galvanized telegraph wires were not insulated by any protective casing or coating and so were subject to corrosion, especially where they rubbed on something. Earth-wires too were prone to rust at ground level. The telegraph wires were supported or suspended at the top of the

Figure 40
Oppenheimer pole in front of Georgetown post office, right c. 1907

John Oxley Library #147589

timber poles by glass or white porcelain insulators - the latter, known as the so called 'petticoat' design, being most popular. Sometimes the insulator was on top of the pole, thus reducing initial costs, but the end grain of the timber poles was most susceptible to water penetration and rot. Consequently the top was sometimes strapped or capped by a small rectangle of flat galvanized iron peaked and nailed to the peaked top on the pole. A galvanized fitting, shaped a bit like a question mark on its side, was then screwed horizontally into the upper pole, and this supported the insulator to which the wire was attached. It is likely that individual poles were numbered, and so linesmen and others moving along the line would have been able to accurately determine where they were in relation to known points.

Metal slotted telescopic telegraph poles, oval shaped in section, were utilized in some places but as mentioned earlier, the round metal Oppenheimer poles were predominantly erected on the western end of the Gulf telegraph line (although there is evidence of them being employed east of Georgetown). One galvanised wire was supported on top of the pole, and another on a short metal cross arm. These poles were heavily galvanized and each one consisted of four sections which telescoped into each other, thus making their transport a lot easier. One pole could be easily carried by two men, even with the stabilizing plates attached near the bottom end. Two of these rectangular plates or flanges were bolted onto the section of pole to be buried, thus providing above ground stability for the pole.

In more recent times, timber cross arms were fixed towards the top of the poles to carry additional insulators which in turn carried copper wires for telephone communication. The poles were painted with numbers on a splash of yellow undercoat, but only the yellow has survived on the very few which are still standing in their original condition.

During wet or very foggy weather, an entire section of line could be earthed by moisture covering wires, insulators and poles. On at least one occasion a linesman went out to repair a line, returning home unable to find a fault only to discover the problem was a rubbed wire on the edge of the telegraph station roof! On occasions a line was deliberately broken by someone needing urgent assistance, knowing that a linesman would arrive sooner or later to investigate the break. The linesmen had a special tool which twisted the two broken ends of a wire tightly together, and then clamped a light metal sleeve over the join.

Figure 41
Different types of below-ground stabilizing plates on Oppenheimer poles

Changing technologies enabled linesmen to throw a wire over the telegraph line and with a simple pocket-sized instrument, they could tell in which direction the break was. Using this or a similar instrument, they could send a message up or down the line (assuming they were proficient in Morse) in the field.

All information relayed along the telegraph lines was of course confidential, and the operators were sworn to secrecy. Nevertheless, knowing exactly what was going on in terms of public affairs, business transactions, travel arrangements, medical matters, police business, weather and even gossip, must have lessened the sense of isolation and boredom for the operators and their families and staff. Over 100 years ago the Morse operators would have been the first in their respective districts to learn of major international events such as the death of Queen Victoria, the outcome of heavyweight boxing title fights, and the San Francisco earthquake. During the Boer War and both World Wars telegrams to the families of military personnel missing or killed in action would have caused sombre reflection.

No doubt one topic of conversation would have been the movements of individuals following the telegraph line from one station to the next. 'Talking' to each other during times of light telegraphic traffic, operators commonly checked in and checked out persons of note who passed through. These included individuals or groups who may have been considered at risk in terms of health or lack of equipment, water or food, suspicious individuals who may have been evading the law, or simple eccentrics and 'hatters'. Clergymen it seems occasionally fell into the latter categories, often travelling light and alone and relying on the Lord to provide and protect.

Figure 42   National Library of Australia
Junction Creek Repeater Station staff c.1890

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Changing Demographics and Technologies

Following the discovery of the Charters Towers goldfield near the Burdekin River and the rapid development of Townsville, a telegraph line was constructed along the new railway linking the two centres in March 1881. This telegraph line was then joined with another line bearing north-westward from Charters Towers up the drainage of the Burdekin River to Dalrymple, Clark River and Junction Creek in September the same year. The line over the Seaview Range from Cardwell had been found to be difficult and expensive to maintain. The battle with the rugged terrain and dense forests during the construction phase was just an indicator of on-going maintenance problems. Line breakages were common and repairs slow and tedious. Less than 10 years after the original line was built, there was now a better alternative route for telegraphic communication with the Gulf Country from the east tropical coast.

Figure 43
Telegraph repair camp on Burdekin River c. 1890

National Archives of Australia

Consequently the Cardwell-Cashmere - Junction Creek line, 119 miles in length, was disconnected and abandoned on 26th Sept. 1881 (although 1879 is quoted in at least one historical reference). The telegraphic traffic through Cardwell no doubt dropped off considerably, and probably didn't pick up again until the construction of the coastal railway north from Townsville through Cardwell to Innisfail and Cairns in the early 1920's. The visionary George Dalrymple who had the ear of the government during the late 1860's / early 1870's had recommended a submarine telegraph cable be laid up the far north Queensland coastline from Cardwell to Cooktown. Had this occurred, the history and fortunes of Cardwell may well have been quite different. The original Cardwell telegraph office is preserved today, Heritage Listed and restored as a museum with some excellent exhibits on its original site on the town's seafront beside the Bruce Highway.

Figure 44
Cardwell Post and Telegraph Office - 1930

John Oxley Library # 8588

The telegraph repeater station building at Cashmere, which no doubt was in good condition, was sold to the local grazier McDowell who converted it into his property homestead. Although the actual wire on the redundant line was galvanized (not copper), tenders may have been called for its recovery. One report suggests material from the old line was retrieved and used to duplicate the new Tate River section of the Cape York telegraph line north from Junction Creek. The line south from Junction Creek right back to Bowen via Charters Towers had been duplicated in 1879. Certainly the local graziers would have helped themselves to any available six gauge telegraph wire for fencing purposes (although as this wire aged it had a tendency to split lengthways), and no doubt some of the timber poles as well considering they had only been in the ground about 10 - 12 years. Anyway it seems that at least some of the ceramic insulators and metal fittings were not recovered at the time, as they are still to be found in the bush in various places. Today nothing remains of the original buildings at Cashmere.

The Junction Creek repeater station and associated buildings were sited beside a picturesque waterhole and one early observer reported that ' *Flowers and vegetables were growing in profusion in a well-tended garden*'. This station was originally sited about 10 miles south of Ezra Firth's Mt. Surprise station homestead, this property having been selected in 1864 and which in 1870 was still considered to be the northern outpost of civilization. With the coming of the telegraph line coinciding with the discovery of gold further to the west and then the north, the Firths' isolation was no more. They had been struggling in abject poverty for years, but suddenly found they had a ready local market for their sheep and cattle. The fact that the telegraph station and the property homestead were in close proximity no doubt led to a mutually advantageous situation. The first officer-in-charge at Junction Creek was named O'Brien, and today there is a gem field focused on O'Brien's Creek north of Mt. Surprise / Junction Creek.

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Figure 45   John Oxley Library #94374
Wyandotte telegraph office south of Junction Creek c.1905

In 1882 specifications were drawn up the Qld. Dept. of Works for a new Posts and Telegraph Office at Junction Creek. At first this seems a little odd, as the original station at that time was only about 12 years old. An explanation though probably lies in the fact that Junction Creek had assumed some considerable importance, being not only a repeater station for the Gulf telegraph line, but also as the first station on a new northern telegraph line. This line was in the process of being built up through Cape York peninsula, with branch lines to the then new coastal towns of Cairns, Port Douglas and Cooktown, as well as centres on the Palmer and Hodgkinson goldfields. Thus Junction Creek was an exceptionally busy station, no doubt needing more space and equipment and personnel. A brief overview of the construction material and methods for the new Junction Creek station is described thus :-

Foundations were to be made of '... *sound ironbark and bloodwood not less than 12 inches in diameter clear of sapwood ... sunk 2 feet in the ground at distances not exceeding 7 feet from centres, the earth being well rammed when set and levelled for plates. Each stump to be capped with galvanized iron to protect from termites.*
Structural timbers to be hardwood, grooved, tongued and beaded pine for internal partitions, doors and window frames to be cedar. Two sets of steps, 2 by 1000gallon tanks on steel capped stumps, four Frenchlight windows, a fireplace with a pine mantlepiece and the outside sheeted with 6 guage galvanized corrugated iron (Gospel Oath Anchor Brand). This brand of heavy corrugated iron can still be found in good condition on some old timber-framed buildings throughout the north.

In 1908, a newspaper correspondent spent a night at Junction Creek and reported, ' *I received a very hearty welcome from Mr. Sineman, Telegraph Master, and was most hospitably entertained. He reported that 4,000 messages pass through the office daily which has five wires and three telephone lines. The office is managed by Mr. Sineman who has two other operators and three line repairers under his charge. There are two commodious residences adjoining the office and several outbuildings for the comfort of staff and storage of material'.* This information suggests the station may have been operational 24 hours daily.

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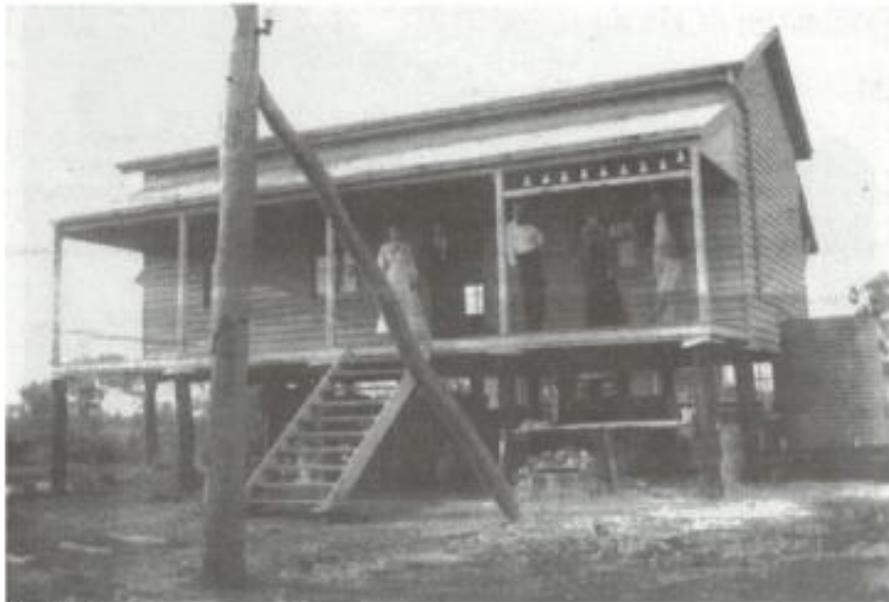
Figure 46
Junction Creek Telegraph Repeater Station - 1908

A photo *above* - of the Junction Creek repeater station taken in 1908 depicts three men and two women casually standing on the front veranda, which is about six feet above the ground. Supported on black timber posts (the black was likely a bituminous substance commonly painted on stumps in those days as a preservative), the only indication that this rather austere building has an official function are nine white 'petticoat' insulators lined up on a horizontal board just under the eaves on the front of the veranda, and a large telegraph pole standing squarely in front of the building, with a large brace propping it up. The building was relocated about 10 miles north to the then new township of Mt. Surprise from Junction Creek shortly after 1908, following the arrival of the government railway at Mt. Surprise from Cairns and Chillagoe en route to Einasleigh and Forsayth. This building is still standing in the main street of Mt. Surprise township, serving as a private museum - *below*.

Figure 47
Junction Creek Telegraph Repeater Station Museum - 2007

Figure 48
Bush band at Mt. Surprise, c.1920

John Oxley Library # 55108

As we have noted, in the early 1870's the telegraph line was comprised of a single six gauge (probably 4mm.) galvanized wire. The basic Morse system was used initially in what was known as simplex operation, i.e. only capable of sending one message in one direction at a time. It was referred to as single cable earth return, i.e. the electrical circuit was completed through the ground via the earthed cables at each station (which had to be kept moist to improve their conductivity). However improving technology soon enabled greater use of a single wire by engineering a number of electrical circuits simultaneously along a single path. Around 1900, copper wires were being added to the single galvanized wires of busy telegraph lines, e.g. the OTL, copper being a much better conductor than iron.

By this time linesmen could tap into the telegraph line using a wonderful new device known as a telephone, and actually speak verbally with others who also had a telephone up or down the line. The telegraph operators initially had to buy their own private telephones when they were considered to be something of a novelty. However the overwhelming advantages of the invention soon became obvious and within a short time, this new technology was to become available to all. Telegraph repeater stations became telephone exchanges and staff no doubt were obliged to multi-skill. The larger centres of population in the south-east part of the continent enjoyed advances in communication technology sometimes decades in advance of rural and northern regions. Nevertheless there was a steady improvement in telegraphy and then telephony in the bush.

Some transitions still lies within human memory in the north. Robert McFarlane was a young man in the 1950's when he and his brother used to ride out on horseback to repair broken galvanized telephone lines near Gilbert River, and about that same time he recalls when the timber cross arms were attached to the metal Oppenheimer telegraph poles to carry dual copper telephone wires. He saw those same wires pulled down about 30 years later for scrap metal by a contractor who sold the standing metal poles to the local graziers for fence posts for $4 each (they weren't satisfactory, being too brittle). Just after World War 11 the original telegraph station at Gilbert River had gone and the telephone and postal services were being conducted in the adjacent police station.

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Figure 49
Robert MacFarlane in 2007, and his family's former home at Gilbert River

End of an Era

By 1905 Queensland boasted 515 telegraph / telephone exchanges. Telephone traffic steadily continued to increase, although the relatively high cost of calls saw telegraphic traffic remain popular, with the number of telegrams peaking at about 35 million annually Australia wide in the late 1940's. Operating both telephone as well as telegraphic services on the same line presented some interesting challenges. For instance telephone users could hear the rapid clicks of telegraph traffic on the line during their conversation. Experienced telegraphists, whilst talking on the telephone, could simultaneously decode and 'read' phantom telegraphic messages they were hearing! 'Crossed wires' were common, where two people engaged in a telephone conversation could hear another muted conversation. Although telegraph / telegram services were diminishing in many areas by about 1950, Morse Code continued to be employed on the Queensland state railway networks for some time after Morse ceased to be used on public wires.

Those living in more remote rural communities such as the Gulf and lower Cape York may still remember the quaint telephone 'party lines' operating up until about 1980, prior to the advent of dial phones. This service was centred on a small central exchange which served up to about 15 properties in the local area they were also the local post office and Commonwealth Bank agency. Almost always 'manned' by a woman, these little exchanges were open for about 10 - 12 hours on weekdays and lesser times on weekends.

Figure 50
Telephone Operator c. 1950

John Oxley Library #30810

The lady on the exchange would direct incoming calls to their destination by a coded dialling procedure based on the outgoing Morse system, e.g. one short ring followed by three long rings. Everybody knew their ringing code and when they heard their 'ring' they would answer by lifting their receiver to speak - or to listen if they heard somebody else's ring! Silently 'ear dropping' on the conversation of their neighbours was a popular past time and a practise which led to much amusement and aggravation! The silent third party sometimes could not resist the temptation to add to the conversation!

The operator - a term which was assuming a different emphasis after WW11 - would also verbally pass on incoming telegrams, putting a written copy in the recipients mail box for future collection. Outgoing calls were made by ringing the operator (by rapidly turning a handle on the side of the wall-mounted instrument) and telling her the number you wanted to ring. She would make the connection from her 'switch' with the ubiquitous words, 'Putting you through now'.

Trunk calls were timed in three minute increments, with the operator cutting into the conversation at that time to ask, *' Your three minutes have expired. Are you extending?'*

....

When global hostilities again erupted in the early 1940's, the Cape York telegraph line assumed major strategic importance with the threat of a Japanese invasion from the north. Between August and November 1942, Australian and American military personnel, together with representatives from the Postmaster General's Department set about upgrading the line north-west from Townsville. The Mt. Surprise telegraph station was seen as crucial to this upgrade.

After the war, the importance of the electric telegraph steadily diminished until finally, with due ceremony the Cape York line carried its last telegraphic message or telegram sent by Morse Code on 24th August 1964 from Brisbane to Thursday Island. From then on sections of the Cape York line were used for telephone traffic, until being progressively replaced by radio telephone and microwave transmitters. Being overtaken by modern technologies developing with extraordinary speed, most of the line was finally dismantled in 1986.

Figure 51
Detail of fallen Oppenheimer telegraph / telephone pole
Gilbert River 2007

The Cardwell to Normanton telegraph line by comparison diminished in importance and function much earlier, through the first half of the 20th century. However the evolutionary process of its final decline was similar to the Cape York line (one of the last working sections extended from Mt. Surprise to Eveleigh station, following the railway line.) With rapidly improving technology and increasing affordability, the use of the telephone rendered telegrams obsolete. Public and private telephone trunk and branch lines were extended well beyond the original telegraph line to service small communities and properties from Cardwell to the Gulf.

Today little remains of the original telegraph end stations and repeater stations on the Cardwell to Normanton line, with the exceptions of the Cardwell and Junction Creek / Mt. Surprise offices which serve as museums. The Gilbert River and Creen Creek sites can be identified and

have special poignancy. Some timber and metal poles still stand in isolated places but most of the wires, both galvanized and copper, were long ago removed. The one chain wide clearing of the line route through the bush can be discerned in places by the astute observer (*see below*).
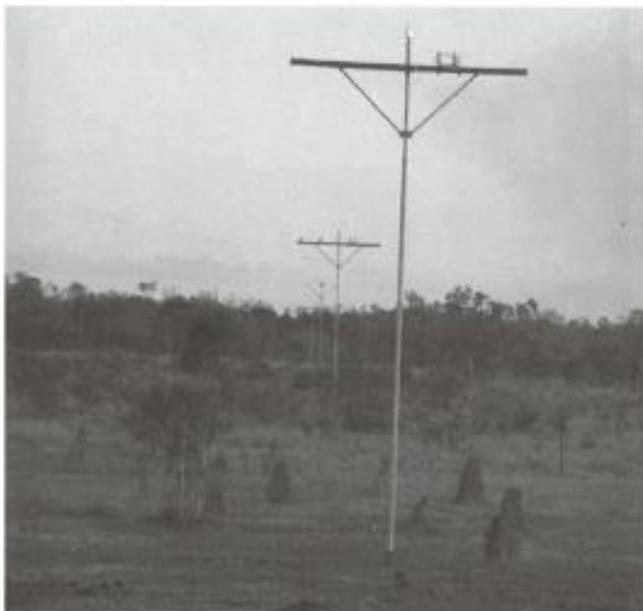

Figure 52
One chain alignment. The original Oppenheimer poles had only a single galvanized wire on top. A bracket on one side later carried another wire, and then timber cross arms were attached to carry copper telephone wires.

Perhaps the history of the Gilbert River repeater station is representative of the many elements of change which have taken place. Being built close to what was to be a significant but short-lived goldfield, after fighting off the Blacks the early staff at Gilbert River in the late 1800's were joined by others as the telegraph station became the focus of a small community which eventually included a police station, a school, a pub and a racecourse. Replacing the original school, another one which also served as a dance hall was built from material from the derelict pub in the early 1950's. By that time the original telegraph office had ceased to exist, and postal services and the local telephone exchange had been transferred to the police station, operated lastly by the wife of the local policeman Jack Schlosky up until when they left Gilbert River in the early 1960's.

Shortly after, both the post office and police station permanently closed - telephone services were controlled from Georgetown. The massive flood of 1974 destroyed the school, submerged most of the elevated Gilbert River site and washed out many of the former telegraph poles. The police station building, converted to a private dwelling, burnt down in the early 1980's. A concrete and stone slab nearby, representing all that remained of the former telegraph station, was destroyed by council workers 'cleaning up' the site. Today the only original building that survives from the once bustling centre on the Gilbert River is the police lockup.

Figure 53
**Former police lockup at Gilbert River
over 100 years old - 2007**

Figure 54
**One of the last remaining sections of the Gulf telegraph line
near Gilbert River - 2007**

Thus within a generation the operations along the Cardwell to Normanton telegraph / telephone line will have faded from human memory. In recent times we have seen communications and information technology break free of physical constraints.

In Far North Queensland after 140 years the bush has almost caught up with provincial towns and cities, and geography and isolation today play little role in affordable communications. Buried fibre optic cables snake through the region like the mythical rainbow serpent of ancient times.

Steel towers with glittering arrays of antennae and dishes now rise above small communities and remote property homesteads, replacing antiquated corroding wires and derelict telegraph poles standing somnolent in the North Queensland bush.

The 'singing strings' are now forever silent.

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Figure 55
Details of telegraph line relics near Georgetown - 2007, top and bottom

Figure 56

Figure 57
Dishes & aerials represent up-to-date communications in a Gulf homestead today.

Undara on the Line

In mid 1990 it was my good fortune to be invited to join the first interpretive team at the newly-opened Undara Lava Tubes tourist lodge located about 25km south-east of Mt. Surprise. I recall being shown around by owner Gerry Collins and Mt. Surprise publican and former policeman Bruce Butler who had had a private 4WD concession to take occasional tourists into the tube sites. Like thousands of visitors since, I stood in awe within these magnificent geological formations, reflecting upon their fiery volcanic origin and wondering about former Aboriginal and European associations.

The significance of occasional old telegraph poles standing in the bush near the Lodge at Undara was explained during my first visit. I quickly realised that in addition to the geology, natural history and Aboriginal history of the place, there was also an interesting historical dimension relating to the early European occupation of the region. The bringing together of the Grimwade papers as mentioned in the Acknowledgements has allowed a lot of the story of the telegraph line to be told, and visitors to Undara today can see the tangible relics of the line. The purpose of this chapter is to explain aspects of these relics, and to introduce visitors to a little local oral history.

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Figure 58
National Library of Australia
Military personnel working on telegraph line 1942

Being a fourth generation grazier whose forebears had arrived in this area in 1862, Gerry Collins spent his childhood on the family properties through which sections of the old telegraph lines passed south-east of Mt. Surprise. The track to the Collins' Rosella Plains station from Mt. Surprise passed by the site of the former Junction Creek telegraph station, where now only a solitary date palm remains. There is a cattle yard nearby known as the ' G.P.O.' Along a section of this same track today on the way to Barkers Tube at Undara, visitors can still see the scars on old ironbark trees where the route to the inland was identified by chopping blazes on trees in the early 1860's.

Gerry was only a young lad during the war years but well remembers the Americans commandeering a large cement mixer from Rosella Plains to replace the wooden stumps of the Mt. Surprise telegraph station. The military personnel also upgraded the old telegraph line between Townsville, Charters Towers and Mt. Surprise. Gerry continues :-

" *Their construction team was camped at the Six Mile yard (now in the Undara Volcanic National Park) on Rosella Plains for quite a few months during the early 1940's. The rough basaltic terrain slowed down their project to the extent that it was of some concern to their senior officers. My father's uncle named Bram was at Rosella then and he had an agreement with the military to supply them with beef for the camp. Uncle Bram would put a bullock in the yard every third day, and the Americans would send their own butcher and a couple of offsiders over to do the job. Uncle was always a bit put out to see his bullocks murdered with a sub-machine gun when a single shot from a .22 calibre rifle would have been neat and clean. Uncle Bram and all the family and employees got sick of eating offal as the Americans would not eat any of the tongue, brains, heart, liver, kidneys, oxtail, etc.*

Times were tough during the war and the family were very careful with their coupons and meagre resources and Uncle Bram just could not stand waste. He had an old 'Diamond T' truck which was the main mechanical workhorse on the station, and he had run the tyres down to 'rags' and it was more off the road than on due to flats. One day four brand new 'B.F. Goodrich' tyres and tubes appeared in the back of the truck, put there by the Americans, and old Bram insisted that he could not accept them. But the Americans would not take the tyres back so onto the truck they went, but then Uncle Bram would not take the truck anywhere in case the tyres were recognized as 'hot property' because that brand was not available commercially in Australia!

On another occasion a military truck arrived with a bulldozer on the back. The driver had had enough of rough roads and refused to take it any further. His truck was nearly wrecked, so he unloaded the 'dozer on the bank of the creek and said they could walk it to the Six Mile. The 'dozer
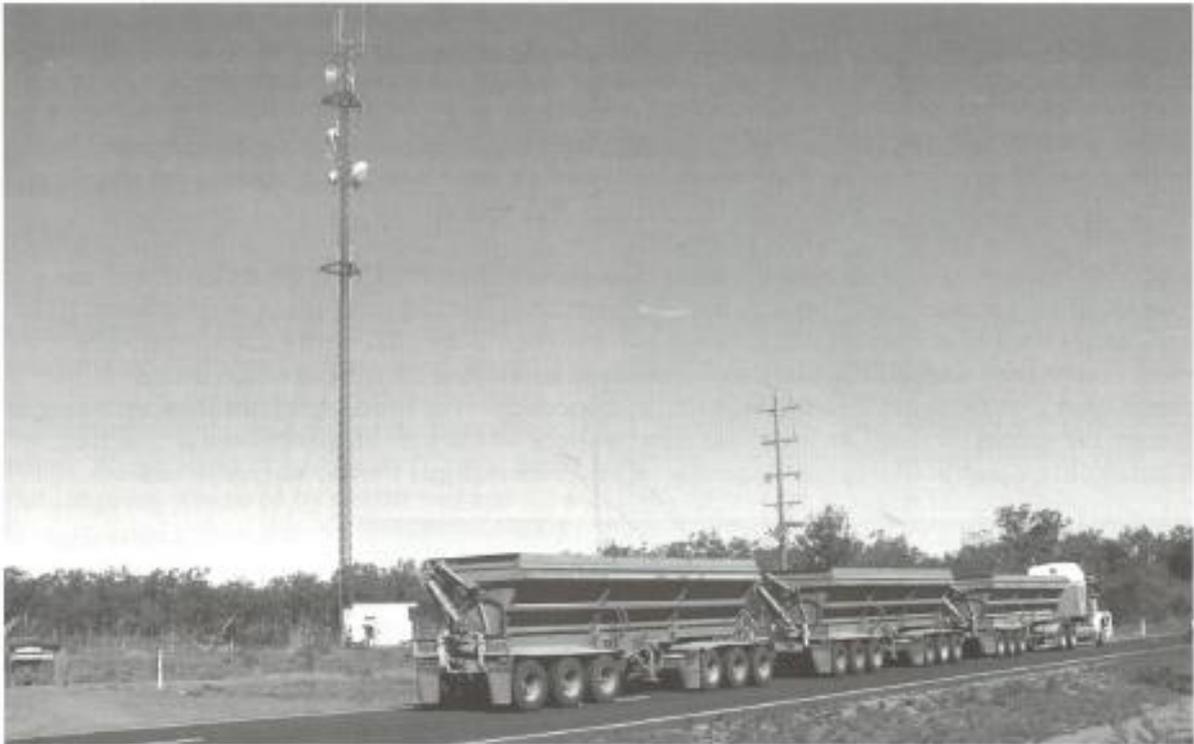
Figure 59
Modern transport and communications in lower Cape York today

sat there for over six months before someone wised up to the fact that it had been lost somewhere and they sent a party back along the line to look for it, not knowing where to look. Uncle Bram was very relieved to get it off his hands!"

. . . .

Gerry's Uncle Bram Collins had had a taste of warfare of a different kind, and much closer to home, when about four years of age. In the early 1880's he recalled being barricaded inside the Mt. Surprise homestead on one occasion when the occupants were under siege by aborigines, helping his older sister load rifles which the adults were discharging with no doubt good effect through firing slots in the timber walls. These attacks and the frequent attempts by the blacks to burn them out led to the temporary relocation of the Mt. Surprise homestead.

When the modern Collins family decided to formalize public access to the lave tubes on their property in the late 1980's, the siting of the railway carriages and the nucleus of the Lodge development at Undara was partly determined by historical precedent. As construction crews on the Cardwell to Normanton telegraph line moved inland from Cashmere in 1870, they encountered a dry volcanic plateau where surface water was scarce, especially during the Dry season. In places granite formations rose up like islands in the former sea of molten lava on this plateau. Water in and under the natural depressions on the edge of the granites, about 100 miles inland from Cardwell, was seem as an important resource for the work gangs and their stock, and about 120 years later this same resource at Hundred Mile Swamp was seen as essential for the commercial Undara Lodge development.

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When work started on the Undara site, care was taken to collect and preserve telegraph line relics, especially ceramic insulators and pole fittings. The line of old posts (many of which were fallen) was identified leading south-west around the edge of the granite past the modern Bush Breakfast site towards the site of the future Heritage Hut and the small creek beside it. Information handed down through the Collins family had suggested that there was once a telegraph line construction camp on the bank of this creek, and indeed a large broken iron cooking pot was found there. Hence today Iron Pot Creek and the Heritage Hut have special historical associations.

Although seasonal, the water held in clear pools in Iron Pot Creek would have been more than useful for the work gangs, as well as for maintenance linesmen and others coming later. (The work gangs must have surely have known of the existence of lava tubes only a few kilometres away - one wonders what they thought of these huge subsurface formations which defied explanation). Walking the line from the Lodge towards Iron Pot Creek today, the interpretive signs explain the special significance of the old eucalypt trees which were chopped down during the telegraph line construction and subsequently regrew with multiple trunks. *see photo below* ...

Figure 60
Multiple trunked trees along telegraph line corridor - Undara 2006

It is clear why the line was constructed on the edge of the level volcanic plain, rather than across the rugged rocky granite formations. The soil enabled holes to be dug with a shallow trench on one side to facilitate the pole sliding in as it was lifted. The poles in the Undara vicinity were all made from the local native Cyprus pine, a very durable yellow fine-grained timber with a pleasant fragrance when cut or shaved. Stands of these trees, particularly large ones, were much more common then than they are now. It is testimony to the resilience of this timber that some of the original poles erected in 1870-71 are still standing, having survived the tropical climate and resisted termite attack for over 130 years. The Lodge staff and National Park personnel ensure that vegetation is kept away from the base of the surviving poles to protect them from further decay or damage.

Immediately beyond Iron Pot Creek in the National Park, there are six standing poles and the remains of two others still visible, providing a fairly intact section of telegraph line about 500 metres long. The spacing between the poles is uniformly about 80 metres. Projecting this line back towards the Lodge, it seems the original telegraph line passed just a short distance in front of the Heritage Hut about where the fireplace is located today. Surviving telegraph poles are infrequent in the opposite direction to the west beyond the line of eight poles mentioned, maybe because of a changed fire regime where the vegetation changes from an ironbark and bloodwood forest to one

dominated by the northern woollybutt. Although termite tunnels can be seen on a few of the posts, none have penetrated the heart of the timber. The Cyprus pine has a strong well-developed vertical grain which sheds water rapidly and so helps to minimise rot.

There is no indication of numbered poles, not surprising as about 20% of the outside timber of each pole has weathered away in the last 135-odd years. This can be determined by the diameter of the surviving metal straps which once circled the tops of the poles. Being about an inch wide (2cm.), this flat strapping was fixed by a short nail and then wrapped tightly around the crown of the pole and fastened by another larger nail hammered through the overlapping metal strap. With a rectangular section and a chisel point, these nails were probably made on site by a blacksmith.

The strapping was intended to hold the top of the pole together as the timber dried and split, minimizing water penetration. Today

Figure 61
Weathered telegraph pole - Undara 2006

some surviving straps have slid down the poles, or can be seen in places dangling from insulator supports *see Figure 61 above* ... Rarely is there much wire from the original line in evidence, suggesting that some at least was indeed recovered and employed elsewhere when this section of line between Cardwell and Junction Creek was disconnected in 1881.

Figure 62
Reconstruction of petticoat insulator and protective metal cap - Undara 2006

This being the case it is curious that the insulators too were not recovered. There are three different types seen locally, the first being the common white ceramic or porcelain 'petticoat' design which was supported vertically by a large round metal pin shaped like a question mark which in turn was screwed horizontally into the pole near the top. The other two types of ceramic insulators were fastened within a cast metal petticoat-type casing by a brown hard-setting adhesive, and the actual telegraph wire was suspended on a metal insert within the ceramic insulator. The outer casing comes in two sizes, the smaller one with a pig tail designed for straight wire support, and the larger one with a H section designed to accommodate strains and stresses where the telegraph line changed direction.

Figure 63
'Slotted' metal Gulf telegraph pole

Figure 64
Examples of the blacksmiths art in the Gulf country from late 1800's

The metal casings came with a curved flange with three holes through which they could be fastened to the pole with coach screws. It has been suggested that the metal casings were introduced to discourage the Aborigines from breaking the ceramic insulators, the hard sharp edges of which made fine cutting tools.

Figure 65
Fallen telegraph pole and fittings Undara - 2006

Most insulators have fallen, although a few can still be seen hanging precariously near the top of some poles which understandably are often leaning after the impact of innumerable wet seasons, cyclones, storms and bushfires, *see photo right* ...

Figure 66
Pole and fittings still standing - Undara 2006
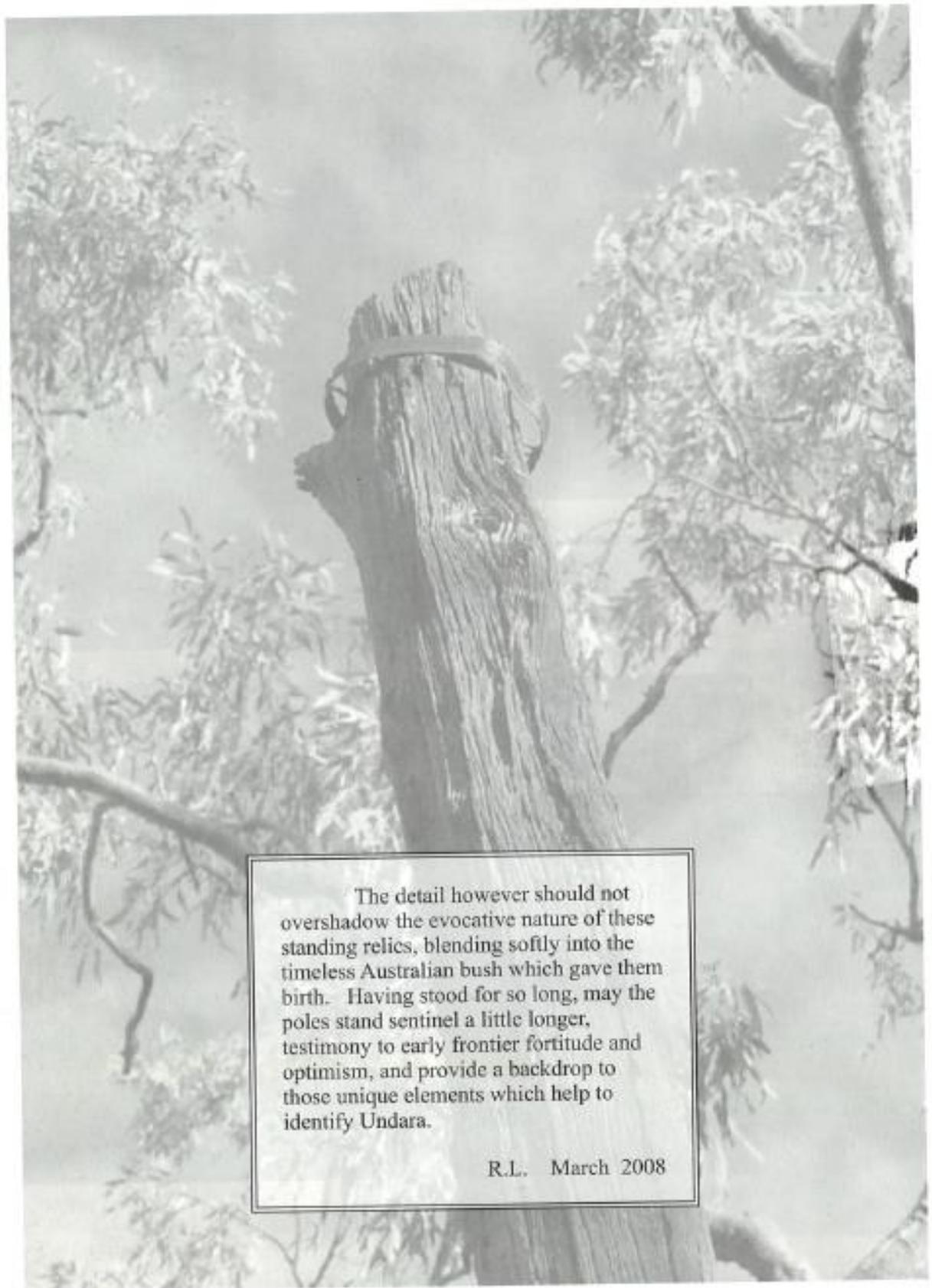
The detail however should not overshadow the evocative nature of these standing relics, blending softly into the timeless Australian bush which gave them birth. Having stood for so long, may the poles stand sentinel a little longer, testimony to early frontier fortitude and optimism, and provide a backdrop to those unique elements which help to identify Undara.

R.L.   March 2008

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Figures 67 & 68   Photos 2007
Former Cardwell Post and Telegraph Office built in 1870, now a museum, *top and bottom*

Figure 69
Telegraph Life in Queensland, drawing by A.P. Agnew - 1878