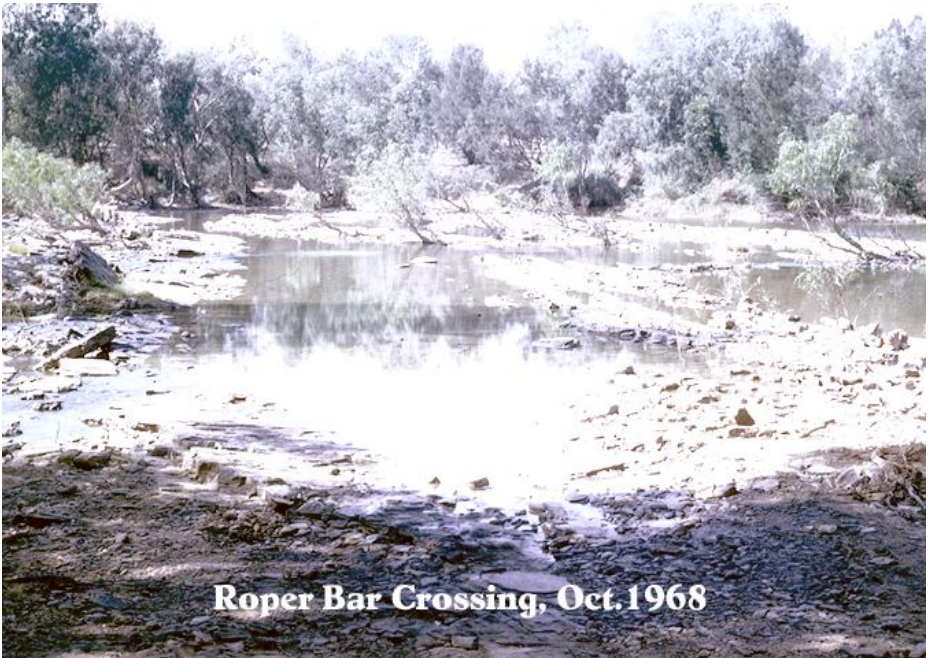


# **A Stroll in History down the Roper River**

**By H.D. & V.J. Januschka**



**Roper Bar Crossing, Oct. 1968**

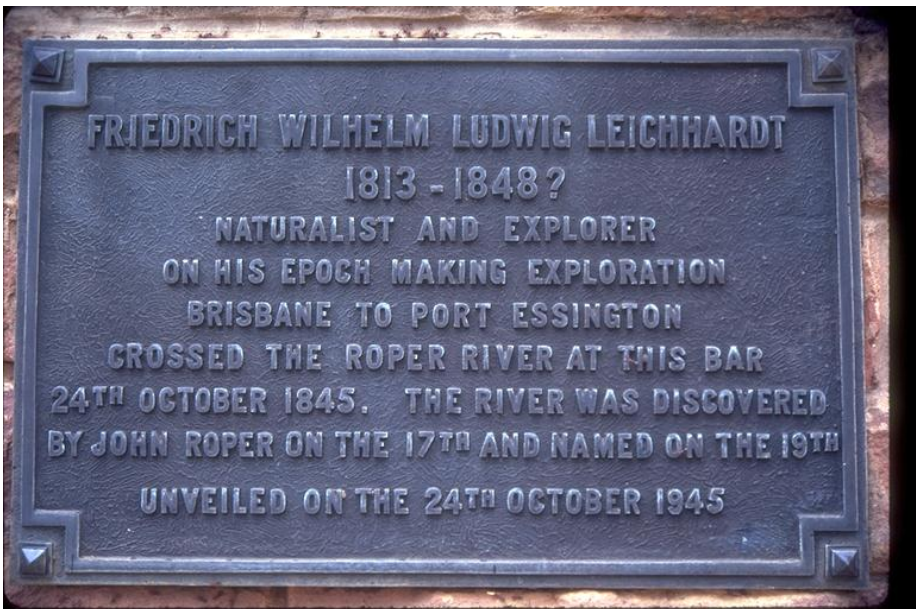
## The Roper River

The Roper River from its source near the mineral rich hills of Maranboy to its mouth in the Limmen Bight of the Gulf of Carpentaria a distance of about 400 KM., flows through a country that is as varied as only the north Australian bush can be. The river has its main tributaries from the north, coming off the Arnhem Escarpments - the largest of them would be the Wilton River. Its course from Maranboy to Mataranka is mostly in a SE direction but after Mataranka it heads mostly East, flowing through rich grazing country. At times meandering at leisure through the black soil plains and there forming many channels and at other times forcing its path through some mountain ranges, like Red Rock, nearby the infamous Hells Gate where many travellers heading for the northern gold fields got attacked by the Natives hiding in the rocks. Graves of some of the unlucky ones are nearby. A short distance downstream lies Roper Bar with the pictures Leichhardt's Bar, a natural level crossing over the Roper River. This is also the tidal limit. On the bank above the Bar you will find the remains of the old Roper Bar Police Station which was built there in 1937.

### 1845, Dr. Friedrich Wilhelm Ludwig Leichhardt

**17th. October 1845.** The Roper River was discovered by John Roper, a member of Leichhardt's party on the way to Port Essington. Two days later Leichhardt and the rest of his party arrived there and Leichhardt named the river in honour of John Roper.

**24th. October 1845.** Leichhardt's party arrived and crossed at the Bar, a natural rock formation that extends the full width of the river. They reached Port Essington on the 17th. of December, then returned by sea to Sydney. Near the old Roper Bar Police Strn. stands a monument to commemorate Leichhardt's journey. A bronze plaque read:



It is unfortunate that this plaque has been stolen and was recently replaced with a politically correct version of this historical event.

## 1871-73 The Overland Telegraph Line

**30th. December 1871.** Patterson and his men arrive at the Bar after a 7 day long horror trip across flooded rivers and boggy black soil plains from Eley to await the arrival of the supply ship "Bengal". Patterson was responsible for the erection of the Telegraph line between Mataranka and Daly Waters. On his arrival, he found that 3 other teams from the OTL had already arrived before him, in all they totalled about 40 men. Their provisions were running desperately low and with the river in flood, Patterson, being the man in charge knew he had to make a quick decision. Not knowing the whereabouts of the "Bengal" and not knowing whether the "Bengal" would be able to sail up the swollen river he decided to send a party of men down the river on a raft which they build out of a wagon, minus its wheels, wrapped in a tarpaulin on the outside and with a few kegs tied underneath to enhance the buoyancy of the contraption. Patterson named it "Elsie" after his wife. The following day he and four of his men set out, manoeuvring the "Elsie" with a few branches as oars. They crew held great faith that the "Bengal" and its Captain for it would have been impossible to row that contraption against the fast flowing current of the Roper River in flood. It would be a one way journey. They must have known that if they did not find the ship they would perish. The brave sailors went with the current all day without sighting the "Bengal". Not risking the floating debris at night in such an unstable craft they tied up and spent a miserable night in pouring rain cramped together and hungry. Thirsty? I don't think so. It was not until late in the afternoon of the second day that they spotted the masts of the "Bengal" through the trees and nightfall before they finally boarded the vessel to cure their hunger with a hearty meal and settle into the comfort of a dry bunk. The "Bengal" was making slow progress, steaming against flood water flowing at 6 to 7 knots and without assistance from the winds; it had taken 5 days to cover 2 miles. So the following day 2 longboats were loaded with provisions, each being manned by four oarsmen and a coxswain who took the urgently needed supplies to the Depot. Patterson remained on the vessel as it made its very slow trip upstream, covering only about 14 miles in the next 8 days, leaving perhaps another 20 miles to go. The monsoon rain had really started to pour down heavy and continuous as is typical in the tropics. One of the longboats returned with the message that now all was well at Depot. Then the following day the tiny vessel "Larrakeyah" arrived with the Postmaster Little on board, he was able to report to Patterson that not only was another relief party on its way from Adelaide but it was being led by Todd himself.

**3rd. January 1872.** The steamer "Omeo" departed Adelaide for Darwin. On board were settlers for Darwin as well as men and stores for the Roper Depot which was established at the Roper River to supply of the Overland Telegraph Line south of Mataranka. A 60 tonne paddle-wheel steam tug "The Young Australian" under the command of Captain Lowrie had left Adelaide a few days earlier. A third vessel, "Tara-rua" with more supplies and horses was to follow as soon as possible. All were heading to rendezvous at the mouth of the Roper because the "Omeo" was an ocean going vessel with a draught of 4.5 metres, and under ordinary circumstances it would have been impossible to bring such a ship across the bar at the mouth of the river. However the situation was anything but normal and the river swollen from a long and extraordinary heavy wet season allowed them to not only cross the sand bar but to take the vessels all the way up to the Roper depot. No ship of that size and draught has since been in the Roper River. The rain was still falling, the river was still rising, and the site of the depot became an island which got progressively smaller as the day went by. They decided it was necessary to establish another camp on higher ground and chose

a rocky ridge about 5 KM south. Even today a small foundation of stone and old relics like hand-made nails, oxen shoes and other bits and pieces can be found at the extreme eastern end of the Roper Bar Airstrip.

### **The paddle steamer "Young Australian"**

The "Young Australian", under the command of Captain Lowrie was mainly used to bring the supplies for the OTL up the river but she also made a number of journeys from the Roper to Darwin and back. She did however, have a big handicap, being a steam vessel and no coal available at the Roper, she had to be fired with wood and it took 2 weeks of chopping wood for 1 week of steaming. On its final journey back to Darwin she ran aground on a rocky outcrop about 20 KM downstream from the Depot landing. All attempts by her crew to refloat her were unsuccessful and she was abandoned. The entry in Log-Book of the "Young Australian" for that fateful day reads as follows:

*"On Monday 30 December 1872, light air from NW and calm at 5.30am, Steam being up weighed - took the cutter Flying Cloud in tow waiting half an hour for some of her passengers. Steamed down the River at 8.45 having just come up from a hurried breakfast relieved the man at the wheel myself, being then at the upper end of North Rock Reach Any marks for the rock being in sight absent the Rock to be covered from an unusually high tide and taking an overfall or Ripple of Tide for it hauled up a few yards too soon to round the NE point of Reach turning quickly into Rocky Bar Reach. Struck the outside of the Rock and from of its shelving nature She ran up with her Firepot out of the water remaining fast being about the top of high water. the Cutter sheering clear although drawing men water and anchoring in stream. - As the Tide fell she fell down by the heel at angle of 12 or 15 degrees. the Covering Board and waterways aft being in course of repair the water Gushed in filling her as far as to put out the Fires in spite of all we could do to prevent it by putting Sails around the stern and caulking up all we could reach. the Stores in Cabin being nearly all destroyed at low water she listed in against the Rock. in examining her bottom saw no damage or apparent strain with exception of a piece of the Firepot got it at once temporarily repaired at high water in the Evening the water rose on the Deck as far as the Engine Room Hatch."*

The next day they tried again to free her, even after unloading as much as possible on to the bank to lighten her they were unable to do so. The crew tried for many days to free her, they even blasted large chunks of rock from under her bilges but it was all in vain and she was declared a total loss. Today the remains are still visible and she is stuck there as firmly as before and is a favourite barramundi fishing spot.

The history of the "Young Australian" was taken out of the original log-book of the "Young Australian" which is kept in the Archives in Adelaide. Perhaps the log-book got wet or it may be just the age but the writing is very difficult to read and some of the words remain indecipherable.

**29th June 1875.** C.H. Johnston, Stationmaster at Daly Waters (O.T.L.) accompanied by Messrs. Rickard and Daer, arrived at the Bar looking for some horses and cattle that may have strayed back to the landing, was speared at Roper Bar. Apparently he went to the river to have a quick swim accompanied by an aboriginal named Pompey who promptly speared him at the same time that the rest of the party was attacked at the camp. All three were wounded however Johnston died next morning. The actual site of his grave is unknown as his headstone (a tree stump) has been moved several times but is now located outside the remains of the old Roper Bar Police Stn. and it reads:

"C.H. JOHNSTON SPEARED BY BLACKS JUNE 30 1875"

The Photo on the right was taken in late 1960.



**3rd March 1885.** John Urquhart, a stockman and a member of the Durack's cattle drive died of fever at Roper Bar, his marble headstone lies about 200 metres east of the caravan park. The tree he was buried under has long since gone. The Durack's were taking cattle from their Stations in SW Queensland to their newly acquired property in the Kimberley's. Due to the rising rivers they had to spend a long wet season at Roper Bar. During this time they camped at Mt. McMinn and grazed the cattle there.

Some interesting snippets from the "Northern Territory Times & Gazette" 1886" under Public Notices.

### ALTERNATIVE TENDERS

will be received for a service between Port Darwin and Borroloola, (M<sup>c</sup>Arthur River) by suitable steamer of not less than sixty tons register, calling at Leichhardt's Bar, (Roper River), once every four weeks, for one year commencing from July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1886.

General conditions for South Australian and Northern Territory Mail Contracts to be observed by contractor.

Further particulars may be obtained on application at General Post Office, Adelaide, or the Post Office Port Darwin.

(Signed) **EDWARD SQUIRE,**  
Acting Postmaster-General.

### OVERLANDERS !

STORE AT THE ROPER RIVER,

**ARMSTRONG & BRYDEN,**  
IMPORTERS AND  
**GENERAL STOREKEEPERS.**

**STOCK AND STATION AGENTS,**  
**LEICHDART'S BAR**  
**ROPER RIVER**

AND  
**PORT DARWIN**  
--0--

FULL STOCKS OF GENERAL STORES AND  
STATION REQUISITES AT REASONABLE  
RATES.

**1885.** The Steamer "Palmerston" arrived from Darwin at Roper Bar with Mr. William Hay bringing supplies for his store at the Roper, which was run by a manager. It would appear from some old records that this store was located at the 4 mile landing, which is the upper limit that a ship may navigate the river. Among the passengers were a Government Surveyor, Mr. J. P. Hingston, and a custom officer Mr. Alfred Searcy later stationed at Borroloola. The journey from the mouth of the Roper to the landing took them 2 days.

### **1889. Roper Bar Police Station.**

There are some reports of a Trooper being stationed at Mt. McMinn as early as 1885 however no records exist of the exact location. The steamer "Palmerston" departed Darwin for Borroloola via the Roper River Depot in 1885, On board were several passengers: A. Searcy Sub-Collector of Customs, a Government surveyor J. P. Hingston , the storekeeper Mr. William Hay and others. Searcy does mention a Corporal Power OIC in charge of the native police at Mt. McMinn in his book "In Australian Tropics".

A. Searcy's second trip to the Roper and Borroloola was in S.S. Ellengowan departing Darwin 20th June 1886, makes reference of a fellow passenger, Corporal Power returning to Mt. McMinn. The first time a police station at Roper Bar is recorded is where the NW corner of the existing caravan park is. The stone floor of which still remains, the building was built out of bush timber and corrugated iron. Over the years it saw many extension and improvements until was moved to its current site. Then in 1937 a completely new and a more modern Station was built nearer the crossing. Although situated on a high bank and sitting on 8 foot high piers many floods rushed through the building and the occupants had to take refuge in a small shed that stood on the hill beside the airstrip, some times it took weeks for the floods to subside. Due to the high cost of maintaining the Police Station as a modern complex suited for this time and age and that the bulk of the police work was required at the Settlement 34 km away, the government decided to relocate the station to Ngukurr. The new police complex was officially opened on Wednesday 31st March 1982. The buildings and land at Roper Bar were then given to the Aboriginal traditional owners. In the evening of the 26th December 1992 it burned down, the ruins are still standing there as witness to a great era.

**30<sup>th</sup> August 1908.** The Church Missionary Society established a Mission about 10 Km downstream from present day Ngukurr Settlement. It was situated directly on the banks of the river and was subject to frequent flooding. In 1948 it was decided to move the Mission to higher ground and it became later Ngukurr Settlement.

**1948.** Roper Tommy, born about 1876, lies buried near the stockyards of the old Police Stn. He served for many years as a Police tracker and accompanied Constable Albert McColl on his patrol to Woodah Is. in Blue Mud Bay in the year of 1933. There McColl was fatally speared by an Aboriginal, Tuckiar. A concrete slab with a commemorative plaque was laid down by members of the Northern Territory Police Force on the 6<sup>th</sup> July 1985.