NOTICE OF GENERAL MEETING

The 5th General Meeting of the Society for 1985 will be held in the

CONSERVATION CENTRE, 120 WAKEFIELD STREET, ADELAIDE

on

MONDAY 22nd JULY 1985

AGENDA

1. Apologies:
2. Minutes of the previous General Meeting:
   Minutes of the general meeting held in the Conservation Centre, on
   Monday 24th June 1985, having been circulated in this journal, to
   be confirmed.
3. Papers and Journals:
   Papers and journals received from other societies and organisations,
   since the last meeting, will be tabled at the meeting.
4. Business:
5. Speaker:
   Mr Christopher Nobbs, Arts Teacher with the SA Education
   Department, will address the Society. The subject of his
   address will be his research into :
   The legend of Murmura Darana.
6. Supper will be served.

R.Allison,
Hon. Secretary
c/o The Conservation Centre
120 Wakefield Street
ADELAIDE SA 5000
Native Days In Ninety Mile Desert

DEAR ELEANOR BARBOUR,

To my appeal for information about the history of the Ninety Mile Desert, I was not exactly flooded with letters, but I did get some valuable information. This history seems to be divided into three parts—the aboriginal days, the coming of the whites and the station era, and then the beginning of the farming era.

I would like to tell you in brief what I have collected about the first era, and hope that it will interest yourself and other readers.

I dare not say exactly where the borders of the desert are today as they are constantly shrinking as the scrub is pushed further and further back. Originally it consisted of nearly all the land from the Coorong to the Victorian border, and from Lucindale as far north as where the Tailem Bend-Pinnaroo Highway and railway now run.

Just who first saw the desert has been forgotten long ago, but it is certain it was not a white man. The aborigines lived there long before our ancestors came. One tribe, it is said, lived permanently in the desert, but apart from periodical walkabouts most of the tribes lived along the Coorong, the lakes, and the lower River Murray.

Many of the old camping grounds can be easily seen by travellers on the Prince Highway. The bare patches of sand with little heaps of fire-blackened stone are a little too conspicuous to suit me, because what true collector of native tools can resist the lure of an old camp site by the roadside? A person finding worthwhile stone tools in them now is very lucky!

The desert tribe was begun by a few families leaving a tribe, which was camped on the lower Murray, and going inland on a walk. They passed until finally the rest of the tribe set off in search of the wanderers. They found them camped happily at a spring somewhere in the desert.

**Fighting The Tjitaras**

They were well fed and declared their intentions of staying where they were. Years passed and the tribe wandered from spring to spring, steadily increasing in numbers all the time. At last they became a tribe to be reckoned with. And one day in a fit of bravado the warriors kidnapped some young lasses from the formidable Tjitaras tribe. For weeks the tribe camped anxiously at Maan Hill, south of Lameroo, expecting an attack by the Irate Tjitaras at any minute, but at last they decided that the Tjitaras didn't intend to fight and so vigilance was relaxed.

It was then that one night the Tjitaras struck, taking them by surprise. The only survivors were a few who managed to slip away in the darkness. Consequently only a few skeletons were found in the desert when the first whites came. Over 70 skeletons were found at that spring, though! As far as I know not a native went near that spring again. No wonder! Who wouldn't want to face a whole tribe of ghosts?

At that spring and at practically every other one I have visited in the desert, many traces of this ancient tribe can be found. Invariably the camps are on low sandy rises overlooking the water, and a rule the soil has drifted, exposing stone tools and bones of various types. The best tools and human bones were picked up before my time, but I have managed to collect some interesting bits and pieces. I have found quite a few "hurlers" on which spear-tips and other small implements were worked. These small implements prove that the aborigine was a craftsman second to no other primitive race.

**Stones Carried Many Miles**

It is surprising the number of different types of stone that are found in these desert camps. Of course the local stone was of little use for the manu-


What did this pile of stones mean to the aborigines of days gone by in the Ninety Mile Desert? Perhaps some reader could tell.

The limestone was used for cooking hearths, and I have seen some anvils and scrapers of ironstone, but the only really useful type of stone was granite. This was found in a few places, such as at Mount Moonee near Keith. Quite a few other tools were made of this material.

Stone spear points and blades for native chisels, &c., had to be imported. Some of it must have been carried for hundreds of miles. Some appears to have come from around Loxton, while the first corresponds with that found at Beaufort.

In native camps where good quality stone is plentiful, a native wishing to cut something merely strikes off a new flake and tosses it away when blunt. In the Ninety Mile Desert camps, however, the bits of stone have been resharpened and used again until some have been reduced almost to nothingness.

Human Remains

Human remains are hard to find now. I have found skeletons, but these have crumbled almost beyond recognition. One burial ground I looked over was strewn with tiny bone fragments and yet the teeth were in splendid condition. Most of the sets of teeth were worn down — one, I believe, to the amount of ash and grit the natives ate with their food.

The only decent bones I have are some fingers. Often the craniums are found among the remains of fallen trees. This supports an article I read once which stated that the Narrigygra custom was to place their dead in trees. It said that a form of mummification was first carried out, the internal organs being removed and replaced with dried grass. The bodies were then carefully smoked before being bound in bark and reeds, and placed on tree platforms.

One of the most puzzling things I have found in the desert is a collection of a dozen geometrically shaped heaps of very old limestone on a low hill. My friends and I thought perhaps we had found a burial ground, but no bones were to be found in the couple of heaps we unpacked. Probably they were built for some ceremonial purpose long ago.

Appreciate the natives in their natural state were not the peaceful, innocent folk some people think, judging by the way in which they massacred the survivors from the Marra which ran aground on the Ninety Mile Beach in 1840. The police hanged two natives, Mungenwarta and Pulgurry, in retaliation, but lack of evidence prevented any further executions. If any readers have not read Simpson Newland's "Passing the Way" they should do so, as the two incidents above and many others of the pioneer days, are colorfully described in it. It was a pity, though, that many names were changed and some fiction mixed with the facts.

Although the officials treated the natives fairly leniently as a rule, the station owners were not always so gentle. Not so many years ago, someone came upon many skeletons in a remote part of the Coorong, and was told that a native tribe was wiped out in retaliation for sheep-spearings. Such tales shook us now but if our ancestors had not driven back the country's rightful owners, we would not be in such a comfortable position today.

The coming of the white man at least put an end to the continual inter-tribal battles. The natives of today have the pioneers to thank for the fact that they can now sleep as heavily as they please with no fear of awakening to a shower of spears.

Later I could tell you about this white man era and the last one which I mentioned.

I enjoyed the letters about "Termite" travelling and hope that he will write again some time. When I am bogged I often think of the ten-wheel-drive tandem he described.

All the best to readers from 

"SPARK-PLUG."

(Well, I have enjoyed your letter, anyway. "Spark-Plug." I wish knew enough to recognise more signs of early natives when I see them, because I must pass the way of plenty I see them when only they are there at home, as at Arora Gorge in the Flinders, which I mentioned to you before. Some readers may be able to explain the heaps of stones, and your letter this may bring you more of the early 'tart' history you are seeking. Thank you for the photograph. It will be good to have your letter some time.)

from The Chronicle July 13th 1961