

Tent on the Nullarbor

Meg wrote this article about living in a tent on Australia's renowned Nullabor Plain, with John. Ned and Jim were not yet born. She sent it in to the New Idea magazine, where it was published on 12 August 1964.

WHEN I tell people I live on the edge of the Nullarbor Plain in a tent they look at me with the interest usually reserved for rarer animals in a zoo.

Not that I blame them. I was surprised myself when my husband accepted a job on one of the several properties, newly opened up along the transcontinental railway line.

Building is going on, but it will be some time before there are enough houses and, in the meantime, a number of the staff are living in caravans or under canvas.

The Nullarbor is not as desolate as many people think. There is some good pasture for sheep and cattle, and artesian water, although costly to obtain, is available in fairly good supply.

Clumps of mulga and desert oak, with saltbush undergrowth, break the monotonous flat grasslands. The most distinctive feature is a number of strange depressions called dongas, several feet deep and varying in size from a few yards to half a mile across.

We get stores, bread and mail twice a week, and as we are close to a siding we can always go in and meet the "tea and sugar" — now the only train left on the run with the leisure to stop at the small sidings. That and the monthly visit of the Flying Doctor make up our social occasions.

The Royal Flying Doctor Radio Service is our lifeline to the outside world. Medical calls, telegrams, fire messages, school of the air and even Country Women's Association meetings come to us through this magnificent service. It gives a sense of security hard to put into words.

Our tent is big, and although our furniture consists only of stretchers and a table, boxes purloined from the builder and artfully draped with old curtains, a tablecloth and a sarong made adequate store cupboards, seats and a work bench.

By watering the tent floor, stamping on it and sweeping it with a mulga branch, we soon had a firm surface and less dust.

I lost my temper one night when a southerly buster hit us without warning, upsetting the dinner I had just served AND my store cupboards.

Everything not tied down set off in a northerly direction. Several empty cartons were soon flying sky-high like kites.

The winds come at night from Antarctica—fierce and icy cold. Dressing for dinner means climbing into warm slacks and sweaters, woollen socks and stock-boots.

We arrived in winter, and I cooked in camp ovens in a fireplace dug out of a rabbit warren.

It was the only soft place to dig, but hazardous as a kitchen, as the rabbits and two or three goannas continued to live there and excavate.

Community shower, washing, and refrigerator facilities make my housekeeping chores easy.

For lighting, we use carbide lamps. Insects do not worry us much, although I treat a family of redback spiders living in one corner of the tent with respect.

There are plenty of birds to watch; the area is rich in fossils. Conversation takes on deeper meanings here, and there are worlds to conquer in books and thoughts.

And now I have plenty of that commodity so rare in the modern world—leisure.

Meg Coten