

## THE EAST-WEST TELEGRAPH, 1875-77

By Mr. G. P. Stevens, lecture presented October 27, 1933)

The Construction of a telegraph line 800 miles in length, through roadless and unsettled country, a great portion of which was known to be practically waterless, would be an undertaking of considerable magnitude at the present day with our vastly improved transport facilities and financial resources, but the conception of such a project and the determined manner in which it was brought to a successful issue by the devoted band of pioneers who had charge of our destinies in the early seventies, assumes colossal proportions by comparison, and must stand to their everlasting credit as further evidence of the indomitable courage with which they met and overcame obstacles to progress.

In order that you may better appreciate the underlying circumstances which induced the Legislature of the day to authorise the work and the difficulties that faced the advocates of the scheme, I must ask you to go back 60 years with me to consider for a few minutes some of the conditions that existed at that period of our history. The total population of the Colony including men, women and children, did not exceed 25,000 and the total revenue from all sources received by the Colonial Treasurer was approximately £135,000. News cabled from London to Adelaide via Banjuwangie and Darwin seldom reached Perth under 16 days and more frequently the items of interest received by this, the quickest route would be a month old before they appeared in our papers. The community in the main consisted of people who, under varying circumstances and aspirations had migrated to the new Colony direct from the British Isles and their interests, apart from their immediate concern to provide sustenance for themselves and families were all centred in the Homeland; and notwithstanding the monthly call of the Peninsular and Oriental Company's steamers at Albany, the sense of isolation from the outer world and the desire to be brought into closer touch with the political and commercial progress of England and the Eastern Colonies had a strong hold on the minds, not only of those entrusted with the development of our natural resources but of the people generally who felt that no sacrifice would be too great if we would bridge the long delay that separated us from news of events that were happening in other parts of the British Empire. The arrival of the English Mail each month absorbed all other interests and the eagerness with which news from Home was anticipated was reflected in the greater activities of the postal officials as the estimated date of arrival approached. Immediately after the P&O steamer entered King George's Sound a brief summary of European news would be handed to the waiting telegraphist to be "flashed" by electric telegraph to the Perth papers. This summary seldom exceeded 800 words, but if the line was cleared in 40 minutes - that is, at an average speed of transmission of 20 words per minutes - the achievement in those days when the majority of our Morse receiving operators depended more upon the eye and the tape record than the ear, afforded food for eulogistic comment from all quarters.

While this feat was being performed, the Royal Mail coach, with its four impatient well-groomed horses under the control of drivers John or Harry Chipper and a special constable, would be drawn up at the post Office at Albany ready to be off on its 55 hours' journey to Perth over what was practically a bush track, and a particularly rough one at that, immediately the last mail bag was forced into the recess structure over which the passengers, at an elevation of three feet from the floor of the coach, had to ride.

The arrival at Perth, sometimes in daylight but more frequently after midnight, would be heralded by shrill blasts of the clarion, on which Guards Radley and Bonner delighted to exercise their lung power, from the time the lumbering old vehicle entered the Causeway until it came to a stand in front of the old Barracks then used as the General Post Office, on the north side of St George's Terrace where now stands the Treasury Building. At this juncture the clamour would be taken up and continued by a mechanically operated gong standing in a cast iron enclosure near the steps leading into the Telegraph Office at the west end of the building, the mechanism being set in motion by the releasing of a key pin, the position of which was known only to the guard and one or two favoured officials. In the meantime, constables on the alert for the first sound of the bugle would have beaten up the slumbering officials in various parts of the city, all of whom, whether employed in the Postal or Telegraph Branch, were required on these occasions to hasten to the sorting room to ensure the placing of all letters and papers in their proper pigeon holes ready for delivery at the earliest possible moment; even the old "Chief", Anthony Helmich, would leave his cosy nest in the tenement he occupied in Hay Street, near Shentons corner, just off the oyster shell footpath which then did service as Perth's chief promenade, to take part in this work.

Long before nine in the morning representatives of all residents in the Metropolis would assemble in the long verandah awaiting the welcome rattle of the delivery window as it was thrown open from within. No need for the officials to ask impertinent questions as to name and address; every expectant face appearing at the window with its family history was well known to Dick Sholl, Edward Ashton, Ted Snook and Steve Hewlett who, assisted by juniors in the rear, would quickly hand out the precious bundles and so restore the normal tranquility of the department until the next leviathan was on its way from Galle to Albany.

It may be permissible, in passing, to recall for the purpose of comparison the class of steamers then in the Royal Mail service. At the head of the P & O Fleet stood the Assam and Sian, with a registered tonnage of 1700. Others of varying capacity, which paid occasional visits and were added later on were the Clyde, Shannon, Cathay, Thames, Rome, Rossetta, Coromandel Cuzco, and Ballarat. Under favourable weather conditions they would average 12 knots an hour, but the log told a different tale on occasions when adverse winds and seas were met, proof of which the writer had on a trip from Adelaide to Albany in the Ballarat when, running into the teeth of a westerly gale, the ship made less than 12 miles in four hours and during that period of battling with the elements broke about four hundredweight of crockery.

Nevertheless those who were privileged to make the voyage from England to Australia in these boats rather than in the old wind-jammers, Charlotte, Padbury, Helena Mena, Palestine, Strathmore, and others, proudly referred to them as "ocean greyhounds", "floating palaces", etc, and boasted that they had had a bath and fresh meat and poultry on each day of the trip. What would have been their ecstasies had they been suddenly transferred to the present day Maloja, Mooltan or Strathnaver?

Apart from the communal urge of the people for closer ties with their friends across the seas and their neighbours in the Eastern Colonies, there was a general consensus of opinion in the business section of the community that an extension of the telegraph service, as proposed to bring Western Australia into daily communication with other parts of Australia would give an impetus to trade that would

indirectly benefit all sections, and so we may conclude that the question to be answered was not "shall" we but "can" we construct the line?

This was a question by no means easy to answer. The cost would run into thirty or forty thousand pounds and our last experience in raising money by loan for public works had been very discouraging, a Bill for £100,000 passed by the local Legislature in 1871 having been held up by the Imperial Authorities until 1872 and then reduced to £35,000. The consent of the South Australian Government to extend their system to meet us at the border had yet to be obtained, and the available information as the nature of the country to be traversed and the possibility of finding safe landing places for material along the coast east of Esperance Bay was the most meagre description. But in August, 1873, we find Superintendent James Coates Fleming, emboldened by the fact that his previous creations - the lines connecting Fremantle, Guildford, Newcastle, Northam, York, Bunbury, and Albany with Perth - were operating successfully, and that the further, extension to Geraldton was making rapid progress, cheerfully shouldering the responsibility of seeing the work through and strongly advocating prompt action to secure the co-operation of South Australia. Within a week of the receipt of Mr Fleming's report by Governor Weld, a despatch dated September 3 1873, was forwarded to South Australia by the Colonial Secretary Mr (afterwards Sir) F.P. Barlee, in which, after giving details of the 900 miles of single wires already connecting the principal towns of the Colony with Perth, he went on to say:

*"Two extensions of land line; at the present time are called for - one from Champion Bay to Roebourne, on the North-West Coast; and another from Albany (King George's Sound) to Esperance Bay and Port Eucla, on the boundary of the South Australian Territory. The latter is not only of importance to local interests and the increase of settlement, but is a matter of primary consideration to the Colony at large, if connected from Eucla to the telegraph system of the Australian Colonies; and it is on this subject that I am desired to seek the co-operation of your Government.*

*"From reliable data, it can be unmistakably proved that the trading and commercial relations of this Colony are already drifting to the Australian Colonies from Great Britain and other Countries and as this tendency is manifested in various ways, it may fairly be hoped that telegraphic communication, if established, would result in a large increase of business with the Eastern Colonies, and this intercourse will be greatly furthered by the monthly communication between the several ports of the Colony by the steamer sailing for King George's Sound in connection with the arrival and departure of the mail steamer for Port Adelaide.*

*"South Australia has been foremost among the Australian Colonies in her appreciation of the electric telegraph, and has demonstrated to the Australian Colonies the inestimable advantages of instantaneous communication with distant countries; and His Excellency Governor Weld feels little doubt that she will entertain the proposal to include Western Australia in the telegraphic system of the Australian Colonies, and so complete the telegraph circuit of Australia. To accomplish this it will, of course, be necessary that your Government should bring a wire to its boundary line at Port Eucla, on the understanding that a wire was carried thither from Albany (King George's Sound) by the Government of this Colony.*

*"It is estimated that the amount and nature of the present trade of this Colony with India and the Eastern ports would ensure at least one thousand (out and in) messages per annum to the Adelaide and Port Darwin line, and to this*

*may be added the Home trade and the traffic of the monthly passengers by the Peninsular and Oriental Company's steamers.*

*"At the lowest estimate of international traffic, inward and outward, six hundred messages per month can be relied on-and it is not unfair to assume that this number will be doubled in twelve months; and at a charge of say six shillings per message to be equally divided between the Colonies of South and western Australia, would amount for the first year to £2,160, the second £4,320. Taking the whole distance of 1,300 miles, and this is probably in excess of the reality, and the cost at the rate of £35 a mile, inclusive of stations, would involve an expenditure of £45,000, the interest for which at 5 per cent, would amount to £2,275 per annum. Telegraph posts from hence can be landed at Eucla at a very reasonable rate, at which place one station would suffice, which can be maintained from hence at moderate cost."*

It would be interesting to quote the whole of the correspondence between the Governments of Western Australia, South Australia and Victoria, which preceded the final agreement to construct the line, but the limited scope of this paper will only permit me to briefly summarise events. At an early stage of the negotiations the valued support and co-operation of that Grand old Man of South Australia, Sir Charles (then Mr) Todd, made its influence felt. He had already pioneered to a successful issue in August, 1872. that great desert line connecting Adelaide with Port Darwin, and, through that period, the whole of the Eastern Colonies with the Eastern Extensions Telegraph Company's cable, which brought Darwin into communication with the civilised world; and he had on more than one occasion suggested the desirability of bringing Western Australia into the privileged telegraphic network of her neighbours.

Charles Todd, Postmaster-General, Superintendent of Telegraphs and Government Astronomer, was indeed, one of "nature's noblemen". Gifted with an all embracing intellect, he was equally at ease whether engaging in abstruse calculations to determine the movement of the planets, solving an electrical problem, or in diplomatic controversy with his Ministers; while in private life he was always the genial, kindly gentleman, interspersing his conversation with an occasional pun, whether enjoying his billy of tea at the camp fire of his linesmen at Barrow's Creek in the centre of Australia, or lunching with Governors Musgrave and Weld. His persistent advocacy of our cause, and his unobtrusive practical suggestions relative to the equipment of the stations, the type of insulators best suited to the climate, and many other constructional details, were extremely helpful throughout the negotiation.

On the recommendation of Mr Todd His Excellency Governor Musgrave notified His Excellency Governor Weld on November 5, 1873, that the South Australian Government had decided to ask Parliament to provide the necessary funds for the extension of the South Australian telegraph wire to the boundary at, or near Port Eucla but Adelaide had its "upper branch of the Legislature", the members of which seemed to move with the same sturdy, cautious stride attributed to their peers of the present day, and a further despatch of December 18, intimated that, on the question of the extension being submitted to this Chamber, it was considered premature. The Government, however, gave its assurance that the matter would be re-introduced when Parliament assembled in the following April, and, in a personal letter to Mr Barlee on January 30, 1874; Mr Todd said:

*"Re Telegraph. I am glad to hear that you are making preparations for the line from Eucla. I have little doubt of Parliament voting funds for our section. The Governor was telling me that Governor Weld seems to think it was negatived here last session. This is a mistake; it was simply postponed. Most persons regarded the work as I do - as a national obligation which our geographical position compels us to fulfil".*

It was not until November 4, 1874, however, that the Chief Secretary of South Australia, Mr Arthur Blyth, forwarded the welcome despatch intimating that the loan measure had been sanctioned by the legislature, and that the work would be proceeded with forthwith.

In the meantime, Mr Fleming's preparatory work at this end had not gone too smoothly, his original suggestion that a preliminary survey of the coast, having particular reference to possible safe landing places, should be made, had been rejected as unnecessary, after reference to the late Lord Forrest (then Mr Forrest, Deputy Surveyor General), who was of opinion that the information obtained on his 1870 exploration trip would be a sufficient guide to contractors. Mr Painting's fear that the lack of detail with regard to safe harbourage would result in speculative tenders considerably in advance of his estimated costs were apparently realised, as his first call proved unsatisfactory; but by dint of personal negotiation he was ultimately successful in securing offers to carry out the work at an aggregate cost of approximately £30,000.

The contractors for the construction were Messrs James G Flindell and John Elsegood, the former being responsible for the poling, clearing etc., while the latter followed up with the wire and insulators. The sea transport was under the control of Captain W.W. Miles, the father of Mr George Miles, M.L.C., who for so many years has so ably advocated the interests of our North West in and out of Parliament.

James Flindell, who was well known to the writer, came to Western Australia with his brother Henry (now an esteemed member of this society) in the sailing ship Nile in 1858. He had previously been engaged with his father in a printing business in Birmingham. In 1874-5 when this projected intercolonial telegraph line was the talk of the Colony, we find him the proprietor and licensee of the Freemasons' Hotel at that peaceful hollow Toodyay (then known as Newcastle). Mrs Flindell, the worthy hostess, was a sister of Robert Minson who recently died at Northam, at the age of almost 100 years. A man of splendid physique and ready enterprise, James Flindell transferred his interests in the quiet country inn to Michael Ryan on March 17, 1875, and equipped his tent for a two-years sojourn in the "never-never".

John Elsegood was a young man in the early twenties engaged in the carpentering and building trade; active, alert for adventure and always particularly well groomed. This latter trait had earned him the sobriquet of "Paper Collar John", but there was nothing effeminate in his character. He carried out his part of the contract with marked ability, and withstood the buffets of two years camp life with the best of them.

Although the final legal bonds covering the various contracts had not been completed by December 1874, matters sufficiently advanced to justify arrangements being made for Governor Weld to plant the first pole at Albany on January 1 1875, as his last public act before leaving the Colony. The pedestal in which the pole was mounted was made in Perth and forwarded by the SS Georgette to Albany; the plate

containing 146 letters exclusive of the crest and monogram of His Excellency the Governor, was fashioned and engraved by Wm. Miller, Perth at a cost of 7/6/- and forwarded by overland conveyance.

The actual work of construction was not commenced until some time in April following. There was no preliminary survey. Mr Fleming, with his sturdy old foreman of the British bulldog type, Jonathan Parish, whose previous service with the Government as a diver had thoroughly proved his resourcefulness and integrity, reconnoitered the country for 10 to 20 miles ahead and pegged out the route the contractors were to follow. After crossing the western spur of Mount Clarence the route was direct to Emu Point at the mouth of Oyster Harbour. Here the first engineering problem was encountered. A waterway 330 yards wide had to be spanned, leaving a clearance of at least 60 feet for the small craft that occasionally passed through the channel. Several abortive attempts were made to suspend the ordinary No 8 iron wire on single poles cut for the purpose, but it was ultimately found necessary to construct a special framework support on each bank. I might say that in passing that, during the first five years' operations, several long interruptions to traffic occurred as the result of accidents at this point, and in 1882 it was decided to replace the overhead wire with a submarine cable.

Reporting progress for the information of His Excellency the Governor on June 30, 1875, Mr Fleming said;

*"The line is laid out as directed as far as Pallinup River. From Emu Point, Oyster Harbor, to Warrenup Range (about 40 miles) there is a great deal of forest and rough country and the work has been heavy, crushing and tearing through very high scrub, passing over long patches of ground boggy in this season and requiring in one place a bridge for the transport of poles, which the contractors have made substantial. From the foot of the range onwards the country is open and favourable, and the line passes over much blade-grass land. I found it was quite impracticable to cross the Pallinup at a lower point and the course from Warrenup to that river follows generally the travelled track, to Bremer Bay. "*

The first 40 miles proved to be by far the most difficult bit of country to negotiate, from the contractors point of view, throughout the whole length of the line, there being no timber belts or waterways of any consequence between the Pallinup River and Eucla. In a later report dated September 18, 1875, Mr Fleming says:

*"The first section of the work is poled and the first station erected; and the line laid out as far as Fitzgerald River, distance from Albany, 137 miles. The country in the neighbourhood of West Mount Barren, named in the specifications as the site of the first station, I found to be most inhospitable, and without permanent water or access from the sea (being off the open Bight of Doubtful Island Bay), and it was abandoned for a favourable position at Bremer Bay, distance 107 miles from Albany".*

This decision was undoubtedly a wise one. I do not know how the names West and East Mount Barren originated, but if it was due to the discoverer's first impressions on approaching them, and studying their rugged, verdureless peaks, and the utter sterility of the surrounding country, they are well named. But even here nature has provided one of her marvelous compensations for our contemplation. Riding along Wellstead's bullock dray track, which rises from the Qualup Valley on the Gairdner River about two miles west of Mount Barren, and

which traverses the Northern slopes of that conspicuous eminence, on its way to Wellstead's lambing station on the Fitzgerald River, the writer, in the spring of 1878 suddenly found himself surrounded by a galaxy of beautiful blooms swaying gently in the breeze on stems rising at intervals of about a chain apart, to a height of four or five feet, as though to get as far away from their environment as possible. The perfect shape and exquisite colouring of these specimens of nature's handiwork would give one the impression that they were the result of years of careful culture in rich soil, but there they are thrusting their tender shoots up through rubble without a vestige of soil. The "Qualup Bell", as it is now called, has great bell-shaped flowers of a delicate greenish-yellow colour, splashed and flushed with crimson.

The decision to erect the first station at Bremer Bay instead of at West Mount Barren as at first intended, brought the first settler, John Wellstead, within half an hour's walk of direct communication with Albany, and was a boon to the officials who subsequently occupied it. Mr Wellstead had been a soldier in the military post that occupied Albany in the early thirties. After his discharge, he had struck out for the first favourable locality along the south coast where he could establish a home and rear a family of four sons and six daughters. He was a grand old pioneer, equally proficient as a cattle raiser, sheep farmer, builder, carpenter or bootmaker, and withal a devout Christian of the Puritan type who never failed to read a passage from the Family Bible after each meal.

The little 20ft. by 20ft weatherboard building, divided into four rooms measuring 11ft by 9ft each, which served as office, storeroom, and quarters for the station master, assistant and lineman at Bremer Bay, was situated on rising ground overlooking a fine estuary which lay about half a mile to the north-east of it. The estuary was teeming with mullet, salmon trout and bream, with innumerable wild fowl of all descriptions thronging its narrow reaches inland. The view to the west from the station extended over 10 miles of plain dotted with clumps of banksia trees and occasionally small lakes, and abounding in kangaroo and emu; while to the south-west, on the slope of the hills bounding Dillon Bay, three miles distant, could be seen the squatters homestead. What more ideal spot in which to domicile three young men whose ages ranged from 16 to 23 could be imagined? There was shooting, hunting and training the boys in cricket and other games in the spare hours by day, and dancing and singing the evenings away in the old man's commodious kitchen with a group of healthy and hospitable girls after family prayers! But this is digressing.

Although the line was completed to Bremer Bay and the station was ready for occupation in October, 1875, it was not formally opened for traffic with Albany until March 8, 1876. This delay was apparently due to the fact that the question of manning the stations had not been definitely settled. Mr Fleming's first optimistic estimate of the cost of working and maintenance provided only for a lineman, with a lad and a native at each station, but wiser counsels prevailed and it was ultimately agreed that a capable station master and assistant with a lineman and native for field work would be necessary to ensure efficient service. Mr Fleming had in the meantime, however, adopted the course which proved so successful on the line from Perth to Geraldton, of making his own operators as he went along. He found an apt pupil in Miss Mary Wellstead, and having taught her the Morse code placed her temporarily in charge until the station master was appointed towards the end of 1877. This young lady afterwards became Mrs John Harris and lived in a small house in the

Qualup Valley before mentioned, where the late John Wellstead Harris, one-time Harbour Master at Fremantle was born.

Leaving Bremer Bay the line takes a north-westerly direction over scrubby country, dipping into the Qualup Valley 10 miles further on where it crosses the Gairdner River. Thence it goes on across the southern slopes of West Mount Barren and Mount Bland to the Fitzgerald River, after crossing which it passes in close proximity to an abandoned copper mine, several open shafts of which remain to tell the tale of adventure of Thomas Sherratt, of the old Albany Round Church fame, who in the early sixties steered his cutter Walter and Mary into Point Charles and landed his party of prospectors. It was some 10 to 12 miles further up the Fitzgerald River that the Rev C.G. Nicolay in his early rambles reported finding coal deposits.

On the line went, over rough volcanic country to the Hamersley and Phillips Rivers, leaving East Mount Barren (the inland spur of which it crosses at a high altitude) standing sentinel over Culham Inlet to the right. Up to this point the work had been carried on under the direction of Foreman Parish, with occasional helpful visits from Mr Fleming but now the long-delayed survey party under Mr Charles Denver Price, assisted by Surveyor H.S. Carey, became responsible for the route and all matters appertaining to the fixing of station sites etc.

The valley of the Phillips River, with its alternations of grass flats and mallee belts, affords a welcome break to the 60 miles of rough country previously encountered; Messrs Dunn Bros had established a sheep station some 30 miles further up the river but too distant to be influenced in any way by the line. Stress of weather and scarcity of labour at the saw mills had seriously delayed the delivery of poles after the workmen passed Bremer Bay, and, in order to speed up the work, and in view of the level nature of the country throughout the remainder of the route, it was mutually agreed between the superintendent and the contractors to erect only 11 poles to the mile instead of 22, from the Phillips River on, the contractors undertaking to fill in the gaps on the return journey.

Following an easterly course over 50 miles of indifferent sand plain country, broken only by the Oldfield River, the line crosses the Young and Lort Rivers at the head of Stokes Inlet and about three miles north of the homestead of John and Alexander Moir, the former of whom was murdered by natives in April 1877. Apart from the activities created by the extensive use of their little port, Fanny's Cove, these settlers were unaffected by the advent of the telegraph line.

The nature of the country improves as we pass over the next 50 miles on our way to Esperance Bay, and, as the constructing party approached within 20 miles of the port, it was by no means unusual for them to fall in with one of Dempster Brothers' nomadic shepherds with his lubra, and sometimes miniature tribe, quietly tending their flock of sheep, much as the Patriarch Abraham did in his earlier experiences outside the walls of Canaan.

While the wiring party was progressing towards Esperance a delay of nearly six weeks was caused owing to the loss of forage and supplies, which one of the contractors boats had thrown overboard during stress of weather in June 1876, in order to save the craft from total wreck. In that month Mr. Fleming, on the schooner Mary Ann, visited Esperance and installed the instruments and batteries ready for connecting up when the line was completed, leaving the late Mr Horace Stirling in charge to open up communication. Sailing on to Israelite Bay and Point Culver,



where, on June 14 he managed to get ashore after an upset in the surf, Mr Fleming found the place utterly unsuitable for a station, and, after finding that the distance from Israelite Bay to Eyre's Sand patch was much shorter than shown on the map, and consulting Mr Price who was then at Israelite Bay, he decided to cut out the Weld Station which it was intended to build at Point Culver and make Israelite Bay the third stage.

On his return voyage, after carefully reconnoitering the coast up to within 140 miles of Eucla, he met with a mishap much greater than his capsize in the surf at Culver. On July 13, Captain Miles decided to run into Bellinger Island, about 25 miles south-west of Israelite Bay, to give instructions to the crew of the cutter Tribune which was anchored there. Finding it too late to get to Esperance that night he decided to stay there, and, the wind veering during the night to the south-east and freshening into a stiff breeze, the Mary Ann parted her cable and piled up on the rocks a complete wreck. Fortunately all hands were saved. Captain Miles managed to recover sails, spars and other valuables and transferred to the Tribune, but Mr Fleming, with characteristic pluck and energy, elected to overland it to Esperance. He walked 40 miles to Mr Campbell Taylor's homestead on the Thomas River, secured horses, and two days later reached Esperance, where finding Mr Andrew Dempster just starting overland for Perth, he joined the party and was in his office writing his report on August 12. You may take my word for it, that the 40 mile jaunt from the Bellinger Island to the Thomas River was not along a tar-paved track, for the first 10 or 15 miles the traveller would be picking his way through salt swamps and stunted ti-tree thickets, and for the remainder of the distance through kneehigh scrub as unresisting as spinifex. He must have cut a sorry figure on his arrival at "Lynbourne", Mr Campbell Taylor's station but his kindly host quickly rehabilitated him in moleskin pants, crimea shirt, and blucher boots, in which garb he presented himself to his admiring staff in the Perth operating room.

To digress for a moment, I should like to mention here that, in turning over the old files of the "Inquirer", I came across a published telegram from Mr Fleming to John Forrest dated March 15, 1876, reading: "Poor Tommy Windich died at Esperance three weeks ago." Although I erected the memorial slab over Tommy's grave, supplied by John and Alex Forrest early in 1877, I have since been able to ascertain in what circumstances he found his way to Esperance to die after accompanying the late Lord Forrest on his 1874 exploration trip across the centre of Australia; but from this telegram I think it may safely be concluded that he was selected as the guide and help to Foreman Jonathon Parish when his party was first formed at Albany.

Esperance Bay was formally opened for traffic by Mr Horace Stirling on September 8, 1876. From the top of the last sandhill crossed by the line, one could almost step on to the roof of the little jarrah structure exactly similar to that described for Bremer Bay, which did service for many years as "Government Residence." The panoramic view from this hill was indeed enchanting, a magnificent expanse of placid water, dotted with numerous islands, with Frenchman's Peak and Mount Le Grand buttressing the south-eastern extremity of the bay and Dempster Head, less imposing, but effectively protecting the south-western entrance. On the slopes of this latter eminence, about half a mile distant from the telegraph station, could be seen Messrs. Dempster Brothers' white stone homestead, with the shearing shed and men's quarters on the flat below to remind the newcomers that they were not the first pioneers to open up this outpost of civilisation. Rank grass, a foot high, literally alive

with quail, covered the stretch of plain intervening between the sand hills and the sea. On that plain the town is now built.

In the following month probably the biggest ship that had ever entered the bay - the British barque *Marjorian* (Captain W. Simpson; sailing master, Captain W. Miles) arrived, bringing a full consignment of telegraph poles from Lockville and Quindalup, and, of lesser importance, Thomas Ralston, aged 17, to join the constructing party as "field operator," and George Stevens, aged 15, to relieve Horace Stirling of his duties as officer-in-charge of the station. Captain Miles on this occasion was accompanied by his wife and two children, Cyclone and George, and Mrs. Miles's sister, Miss Emily Gallop. The *Marjorian*, after landing a large portion of her cargo, proceeded east to the Duke of Orleans and Israelite Bays, taking with her Messrs Stirling and Ralston.

On leaving *Esperance* the line takes a sweep to the north to avoid Sandy Creek and other swampy land, but, having passed inland of Mount Edward, it takes a southeasterly course past Mount Merivale and on through lake and mount-bespattered country to the Duke of Orleans Bay. This cosy little harbour is where the French whaler was lying that succoured Eyre when his last ounce of flour had been exhausted on that memorable journey from Fowler's Bay to Albany in 1841. From this point the line follows a comparatively straight easterly course for 60 miles, crossing the Thomas River about three miles south of "Lynbourne," and continuing on past Cape Arid and Cape Paisley to Point Malcolm, where it turns to the north through 12 miles of thick coastal undergrowth and mallee, then intersected by innumerable tamar pads. The patter of the graceful little marsupials could almost be heard at the door of the Israelite Bay station. The site chosen for this station was on a knoll overlooking an extensive salt marsh to the west and a samphire flat to the east. Across this flat, almost hidden in the sandhills between the station and the sea, stood a little two-roomed cottage, the home of Mrs. Brooks, the widow of a naval captain, and her son and daughter. The cottage was named 'Waratah' which interpreted meant "viewed at a distance" This little family, highly cultured, having fallen on adverse times in Victoria, had elected to try their fortunes in the West, and had chosen a spot as far removed from civilisation as possible. With two or three hundred sheep, which they were depasturing some miles inland, they were making a desperately courageous effort to regain their lost prestige, but the fight was a hard one, which no one recognised more keenly than the delicately-nurtured daughter, who on one occasion when the writer was extolling her brother's work on the cottage said, "Ah yes, Mr. Stevens, Paul has built up a comfortable home, but it seems to me, with the present outlook, there is little for him to do but to make three coffins to await the inevitable climax. This sad forecast has, I regret to say, been almost literally realised.

On December 5, 1876, Mr. Stirling officially opened this third station and remained in charge until relieved by the appointed station master, Mr. E.G. Carige, of Victoria, whose departure from Perth was recorded in the office log book thus: "August 26th, 1877 -- *Planet* sailed for Eucla with Messrs. Fleaming, Carige, Scott, goats etc.

The remaining 340 miles to Eucla is without a habitation of any kind, and the difficulties facing the parties may be gleaned from the following extract from one of Mr. Price's reports:-

*"Scarcity of water is now one of the difficulties presenting itself, or rather not so much its scarcity as its being inconveniently situated with regard to the works. At point Malcolm, plenty, also at Israelite Bay, and Wattle Camp, although none intermediately between those points, and therefore for the carrying on of both the survey and construction, it has to be packed or carted to those engaged on the work. It is my intention immediately within a week or 10 days at most to proceed from Wattle Camp by Pt. Culver and over the cliffs to Eyre's Patch, to obtain some knowledge of what we shall have to contend with on this much dreaded section. Should I be so unfortunate as to fall in with no water between the two latter places, I shall not be able to gather all the information I should like as to possibility of finding landings, etc., as it would then be necessary to push through for the sake of the horses, it being quite impossible for them to carry a sufficiency of water for their consumption: I am, however, sanguine that we shall find some, as it is almost absurd to suppose that Mr Forrest should have met with the only water in this length of 150 miles, taking as he did a haphazard direction"*

Running a few points to the east of north, the first 40 miles of line from Israelite Bay past Wattle Camp and on to Kennedy's Well is the only blot on the escutcheon of the super-intendant and surveyor in charge. The poles were rafted ashore at convenient distances along this unbroken stretch of beach and erected in lines, straight or otherwise, according to the contour of the falling surf, just clear of high water mark. Exposed as it was throughout the summer to the prevailing easterly winds, and drenched with the salt spray arising from the breaking surf, each support represented a serious leakage of current, which, when multiplied by eight hundred-odd, reduced the normal speed capacity of the line from 30 to 5 words per minute and often rendered it entirely unworkable for hours. As it approached within 20 miles of Point Culver, and landing on account of the greater ocean swell became impracticable, the line was taken three or four miles inland and followed a course behind the belt of sandhills and mallee skirting the seaboard to the point.

Point Culver, the western terminus of 120 miles of perpendicular cliff, which rises from 200 to 250 feet out of the sea, seems to shed an uncanny influence for some miles around. There is an ample supply of fresh water in the sandhills just before the Bluff is reached, so much so that one hollow is converted into a veritable quagmire, where several of the contractors' horses disappeared under the surface and were never recovered, it was a favourite rendezvous for tribes of Bardoc natives from the country around and to the south-east of Fraser Range and the lonely traveller never knew the moment that he might run into a group of these naked warriors lurking in the mallee.

Always there was the incessant dull roar of the surf as the swell from the Southern Ocean dashed against the cliff or fell in graceful curves ranging from two to eight feet high on the beach. It was here that Mr. Fleming experienced his first narrow escape from drowning when landing to select a site for the Weld Station, and on January 7, 1877, poor Michael Reddin, one of the boatmen on the schooner Twilight, was pinned under a boatload of poles they were attempting to land through the surf, and was drowned before he could be released.

A fairly good track was found up the side of the range where it sweeps away inland towards Mount Ragged, and up this route many loads of poles and wire were carted, but a more fortunate discovery was made by Price's party of a slip in the cliffs 37 miles east of Culver. Here it was found possible to raft poles ashore from vessels in

the offing on to a two-chain strip of sandy beach, from where they were raised by a specially constructed derrick to the top of the cliffs. Many tons of material were hoisted in this way to the great advantage of the contractors, who were thus enabled to establish a distributing centre from which carting across the tableland in either direction was a comparatively easy matter. This discovery is mentioned by Mr. H.S. Carey in a long and interesting letter to his father or brother published in (I think) the "Perth Gazette" of February 14, 1877.

The problem of keeping the parties supplied with water across this stretch of 120 miles of cliff country was an ever-present one, but with the help of friendly natives many unknown rockholes were located, and, by careful management and the occasional use of improvised condensers at the slip, the difficulty was overcome. The flinty nature of the limestone on this immense plateau was such that in many places it was found impossible to sink post holes without blasting, and, in these places, with the consent of the supervisors, three feet was sawn off the butts of the poles and they were stepped in shallow holes drilled in the surface rock and supported by loose boulders stacked up to three or four feet high around them. Many of the poles so erected have weathered the storms of half a century and are standing now, a monument to the durability of Western Australian jarrah, as sound as the rock in which they are planted.

It was during the construction of this section that Twilight Cove got its name. Two small craft, the Twilight and Catabunup, having safely discharged a portion of their cargo at the slip, sailed on to secure anchorage and land the balance of their supplies at a little nook protected from the south-west winds at the eastern end of the cliffs. They had hardly got their anchor down, however, when a strong blow set in from the south-east, and the holding ground proving insecure, both were driven ashore and became total wrecks. Among those on board was Mr. Matthew Price, who with several others of the rescued mariners tramped 170 miles to Israelite Bay, where our old friend Horace Stirling ministered to them in their sore need.

Wm. Graham, ex post and telegraph, master of Kadina, South Australia, with his assistant, Harry Sutcliffe, of Pinjarrah, passed through Esperance in May, 1877, on his way to become station master and "monarch of all he surveyed" at Eyre's Sand Patch, which he officially opened on July 17.

During the month of August, the South Australian section of the line then being completed to Eucla, the Governor of Western Australia, Sir William Robinson, expressed a wish that an estafette should be appointed to carry despatches between the end of our wire and the south Australian terminus. My young friend field operator Tom Ralston promptly volunteered for service, and from that date until through communication was established on December 9, he inaugurated an express that brought us into almost weekly communication with Adelaide. I would like to recount some of the experiences of this young hero on these lonely rides, but space will not permit. I must, however, quote one brief entry from his diary:

*"Friday, 28th September. Arose daylight and got a start. Pretty fair beach until within 15 miles of Eucla, where had a job to round little cliff; saw vessel in Eucla harbour about noon and arrived 2pm. Horse done. Handed over batch of messages to Baldock. then went to Price's Camp to get something to eat. Saw Mrs. Graham and family and passed a very pleasant evening."*

The Mrs. Graham referred to was the wife of Wm. Graham and had arrived at Eucla in the *Star of Hope*, steamer of 50 tons burden, to join her husband at Eyre's Sand Patch with her family of four girls and two boys, the eldest of whom, then a girl of 17 summers, will, if she lives another year, have completed a term of servitude of 50 years as the wife of the writer.

The absence of any permanent water along the coast between Eyre and Eucla rendered the conditions of life most unenviable for both man and beast throughout the whole of this final lap. Condensers mounted on carts placed in the sea with cooling pipes leading to the receptacles ashore were in constant use; the product being not only particularly scant, but of very questionable potableness. All difficulties were, however, eventually overcome, and on December 9, 1877, the Perth Office Diary records the completion of the last span with the following brief entry; "*Saturday, 7pm Eucla line opened. Hurrah!*"

The building at Eucla was quite an imposing structure with a central porch and operating room dividing it into separate quarters of four rooms and a kitchen each for the South and West Australian staffs; the whole being surmounted by a 30-foot flagpole. It overlooked a sapphire flat on which, when the staffs grew in the boom days of the early nineties, many interstate cricket matches were played.

The anticipations of the promoters in the matter of settlement along the coast, if we except the growth of Esperance since the Norseman goldfields were discovered, have not been realized, but in all other respects the old string fully earned its cost, cementing friendships and promoting trade with South Australia and the other colonies, and doing yeoman service for the State when our gold discoveries suddenly lifted the population to 160,000.

Few, if any, of those who took part in the forging of that first link with our neighbours and the outer world remain alive; they were all men of sterling character deserving our warmest approbation, and of the deeds done in those by-gone days we may well say with Dickens: "*Lord, keep my memory green.*"