

FILM AUSTRALIA'S OUTBACK DVD

Interview with Lee Robinson

Q: How did you come to work in the outback?

LR: The first film that I made in the outback was *Namatjira the Painter* and as a result of that I became very interested in the source material that was available in the Northern Territory - subjects that had never been really touched before. I think we spent every winter in the Northern Territory for about three or four years. Some of the films that we made were *Outback Patrol*, *Bush Policeman*, *Crocodile Hunters*, *Darwin-Gateway to Australia*. And as far as a script is concerned, not only did we never have a script for *Namatjira the Painter*, I don't think we ever scripted anything that we made in the first three or four years of our working in the Territory.

Namatjira the Painter we did in 1946. I'd just come out of the army a couple of weeks before, from the war. And we were five months working on that picture. Rather than have a big crew on a short time we had just the two of us and lived out in the bush and worked with the Aboriginal painters. Unlike today where fairly well-equipped units go out into the field and work for relatively short periods of time, our technique in those days was to work with a two-man team.

Q: Could you talk about the making of *Outback Patrol*?

LR: *Outback Patrol* was a pet subject of mine. The resultant film was highly regarded, and released as a support for feature pictures in the theatres and so on, which was pretty rare in those days for us. I decided to do it out in the Harts Range, which was out a couple of hundred miles from Alice Springs. It was a horse patrol area, and it was policed by a relatively young fellow, 20s, early 30s, and he was married with two little girls and a beautiful wife who'd originally been Miss Northern Territory, so she was a good looking lady.

So, [cameraman] Frank Bagnall and I, we went out and lived there on the Harts Range Police Station. And when any function came up such as Registrar of Mines where Bob Darkin had to go to see some of the Mika Mine owners - he'd have to go and check they had their licences - we were to go with him. And then he would be called in to prosecute a charge against an Aborigine who'd stolen a gun from somewhere or other and we would sit in on that.

From time to time, we would send film back down to the laboratory and get a note back saying all okay, no scratches and blemishes. But as far as ever seeing anything, we never ever did that until we got back to Sydney and into the editing room, and for the first time looked at all the film and started editing.

Q: What did you shoot it on, and did you have lights?

LR: We had Imo cameras in those days, and I think they were only 100 feet magazines, so they were not very efficient. They were the camera that was used all through the war - the Imo - and we'd inherited them from the army. So we had the Imo, we had absolutely no lighting or reflectors and stuff, and we had a

wire recorder, which inevitably broke down. Sometimes we actually shot in sync sound with the old Imo and the old wire recorder system.

We had to be self sufficient living out there because Bob Darkin, his supplies for his wife and family were a matter of some organisation. There was no way you could run back and forward to get supplies or do anything really.

Q: What did you eat and how hot was it?

LR: When we were living in the home - in the police station - we were well looked after by Vicki Darkin, Bob Darkin's wife, and she fed us well, as long as we brought our own food and that. But when we were working out with the horse patrol, we would have to carry our own water and enough food for whatever period of time we were out and just be happy to get back to the station again to have a bit of a feed.

Q: Did you camp out when you were out on patrol and just cook over the fires?

LR: When we were out with the horse patrol, we just went like Bob would, had our own swags and our own blankets and stuff on packhorses, and our food and essentials, just the way he did. We just followed, in fact, what he did - he and the tracker.

Q: Did you have any disasters on location, like equipment breaking down or dust or anyone getting hurt?

LR: I remember, once in '46 when we were doing a segment for the *School in the Mailbox* film, and we were going down south to film a young boy on the radio, we took off from Hermannsburg and we had a bit of a problem with the aeroplane, which wouldn't go up very high and was starting to come down. Eventually we were in the trees and the wings were falling off and we crashed out in the desert, out from Hermannsburg and had the problem of trying to get back to town again, to Alice Springs.

I can also remember we had a lot of trouble with the Imo cameras because we used to put a pretty heavy load on them. With 100 foot loads, you could only shoot for about two minutes at a time. And with the Imo that we had, it broke the spring that turns the thing over and makes the film go through the camera. So we had to go back into Alice Springs to try and get the spring fixed up. There was a fellow called Tex Lechlichner who everybody said was an ex Al Capone gangster. He certainly was an American but I don't know about the other. But he was a brilliant fellow, and we just waited for about a day or two and he got the spring all back together and got us going again, and it lasted as far as I know.

Q: What about dust in the camera?

LR: We didn't ever have any real problems with dust in the camera. We used to keep the exposed film in a tea chest; I don't know what the tea did, absorbed moisture or something. In any event the two cameramen that I worked with over the first five years were both particularly careful about their cameras. It's like the soldier with a rifle, you look after it very carefully and every night before going to bed, both [Avel] Reingent and Frank Beagall, the last thing they would

do was just check out the camera and make sure there was no dust in it and all right for the next day's work.

Q: How did you get the exposed film back to Sydney?

LR: On *Namatjira the Painter*, we had access to transport, because we were based at Hermannsburg Mission, and Hermannsburg ran a utility truck in and out of Alice Springs fairly regularly. So we would send film back with anybody that was going, provided we thought they were reliable. I remember when we were shooting, we were well out at one time and Russell Drysdale, the painter, and his wife and the boy turned up and they camped with us for a while and somebody like that would be quite responsible to take the stuff back to Hermannsburg. In the case of the colour film in 1946, it went to Kodak in Melbourne but in all other respects we shot in black-and-white and it went straight down to Sydney.

If we were in a place like the Merry River up in Arnhem Land and shooting on, say, the *Crocodile Hunters*, there was no way that you'd get any film back and the whole of the film would travel with us when we came into Darwin. I remember in one of the films we did up there, *The Pearlers*, we went out with the pearling fleet and watched the divers work. We stayed with that for about a week and eventually we knew exactly how the whole thing worked and then we shot the whole picture in one day, the entire picture.

Q: Where did you learn to make films? You didn't go to film school, did you?

LR: Well, there was no such thing as a film school. The only places that existed were Fox Movietone News and Cinesound, and most of the fellows that came into the business after the war were trained in those laboratories. My old friend, cameraman Bill Grinham, I asked him once how'd he come into the motion picture business, and he said, it was the depression and his mother told him that the only two things that went along pretty well in the depression were the breweries and the pictures. And she said, "You've really got two choices: you can get into the booze or you can get into the flicks". And so he said, "I decided I'd rather have the pictures, so I spent all my life there". He was the finest operator that we ever had in this country.

In the last year of the war, I was in a unit called the Military History unit, which carried a crew on each division of five or six people. The Lieutenant or Captain would do all the historian work, there'd be a still photographer, a motion picture photographer and sometimes a war artist and, on odd occasions, a sculptor. I was with that unit for about a year, then the Americans dropped the atom bomb and the war finished very quickly. We covered the end of the war. And I became interested in the motion picture side of things.

I'd already been fairly successful as a short story writer. I'd had a lot of stories published in the *Daily Mirror* and the Brisbane *Sunday Mail* and so on and I was actually going into the ABC as a scriptwriter. Then someone suggested I go and talk to the National Film Board. So I went to the Canadian Ralph Foster who was the Film Commissioner and talked to him on the Thursday and told him what I'd like to do and what I'd done in the war. He put me on straight away: I started on the next Monday and stayed there about six or more years.

Namatjira was probably the first documentary ever made in this country. There were things like travel logs and little films about Coolangatta but not documentary as we knew it. And it was seen by Alexander McDonald the film critic for the *Smith's Weekly*, and he carried on a bit about the fact that it could never be shown in cinemas, and it started a bit of a hoo ha and eventually the picture was sent to America for a screen blow up and actually did play the cinemas. It was quite unique.

Q: Can you talk about the editing of the films?

LR: In the time of both Ralph Foster and Stanley Hawes at the film unit, a director edited his own work - it was just standard procedure. And when you came back at the end of the winter and went through all your stuff, there would be a hell of a lot of material. So it'd take you days to get through it all, and it was a major problem to sort out what belonged to which film. And then one by one you do the editing and you worked right through the whole process. Stanley Hawes just loved that system and it persisted for some years until we started to specialise.

Q: What equipment did you use?

LR: *Namatjira*, that was done on a little viewer. Pretty primitive stuff, done in Ralph Foster's kitchen for that matter, the splicing of it. And then later we got the old moviolas and you edited reel to reel in the old foot splicer and the hot splicer. We were just overjoyed when we got these moviolas from America and even though they still worked reel to reel and the cutting was on an old hot splicer and everything, they were years ahead of anything that existed in the country at that time, so we thought we were very, very sharp in the editing process.

Q: What was so good about it?

LR: The moviola could run 24 frames, and it was a motorised operation that put it through the gate at exactly what it was supposed to. The 16 mm machines that we used had no control. You could be going fast or slow and you could have to go back two or three times to get the rhythm, winding the damn thing to get what was anything like a proper life-like movement.

Q: How did you learn to construct a film?

LR: I didn't have any filmmaker in Australia to talk to. We really only had Ken Hall and Charlie Chauvel making films. But we had at that time Harry Watt making a film in Australia and I asked Harry, "What the hell do you do when you're directing a picture?" and Harry said "Well, you just use your common sense". And he explained to me about not crossing the circle. He described about overlapping action, you overlap the action so you've got a cutting point and so on. So I had a little idea about what that was all about. And I was well served by the cameraman who was [Axel] Poignant who had been stills photographer on *The Overlanders*, on the Harry Watts picture with Chips, and was actually a very astute fellow.

Q: What was it like working with Chips Rafferty?

LR: Working with Chips Rafferty was always a pleasure. He was a terribly capable actor in all of the techniques he used. The one thing he wasn't clever at was being a natural actor, but he overcame these things by developing all his own techniques. American actors that have worked with him have told me, 'We never worked with an actor like Chips Rafferty who was so hot on technique'. They said if he had a mark to hit and it was 20 paces away and he'd rehearsed it once, he would hit that mark spot on. And he was brilliant at things like...he smoked a lot in his pictures, and he'd have a cigarette make its way to its end without any continuity problems. He was the same about costume. And, because as an actor he always played himself, it was no problem. You wouldn't say that fellows like Paul Hogan were great actors, but they just have the presence to carry the performance. The one thing about Chips, he was 100 per cent loyal to all of his crews. There's not a person that ever worked on a Chips Rafferty picture that didn't swear by him.

Q: In *Outback Patrol* is that Darkin's voice or did you replace that voice with Chips?

LR: No, that is Darkin. On *Outback Patrol*, the voice that you hear in the courtroom where Bob is charging Toby for having pinched a rifle is actually Bob's own voice and it's the magistrate in charge of the court - that's their own voices. It was one of the few times we were able to use the wire recorder, which was a hopeless machine. I think that's the only time that we were able to get sync in that, but we had to use it exclusively in *Namatjira the Painter* for all of the corroboree material.

Q: What was it like working for the National Film Board and with Stanley Hawes?

LR: It was always a bit of a problem with working with the film unit that you were never quite sure who you worked for - the Commonwealth Film Unit or the National Film Board. As far as the day-to-day operation was concerned, that was the work of the film unit, but as far as the selection of the films that we made for the coming year, and approval of various appointments and such, that was all the National Film Board. With Ralph Foster, who was there for about the first year of the National Film Board, it was not a problem, because Ralph had the expertise to deal with both the Film Board and the Department [of Information]. And we had a few fights with the bureaucracy and he was a big-enough man and a solid-enough personality to win all of them.

Stanley, on the other hand, was brought into the operation by Ralph to take over from him. Ralph was paid a higher salary than the prime minister. Chifley was the prime minister at the time and he told the head of our department that there was no way that he would have Ralph Foster for more than the one year because he wouldn't have anybody get paid more than the prime minister. But Stanley Hawes was paid nowhere near what Ralph was paid. He had nowhere near the sort of visionary mind. I don't think Stanley would have ever made a picture like *Namatjira the Painter*, whereas it was Ralph's first film - it was straight up. And there were a lot of fetishes about Stanley that permeated through the department for a long time after he got there. He hated policemen for some reason and he would never ever have a policeman shown in a decent

light in a picture if you could avoid it. He hated wide-angle lenses - he used to lock them up in the safe and wouldn't let the cameramen get access to them.

Q: Who else was there with you? Was it an exciting time?

LR: The early days of the film unit were very exciting and I don't think the first two or three years have ever really been repeated because of the excitement of actually making these documentary films for the first time and having a coterie of friends of all walks of life in artistic terms. And, there were a lot of parties, of course - I was only 22 when I joined the film unit. And there was a sort of artistic community gathered about. After the first four or five years, I think it settled down to a much more bureaucratic thing. Pretty soon it shook itself down to being basically the left-wing element against the Catholic element in the film unit and that became something of an ongoing struggle. And don't forget that this is a period when we were asked to take the oath of allegiance to the then Prime Minister - all the unit except Geoff Powell, he refused to take it.

Q: How long did you go without sleeping in those days?

LR: My attitude was there were these poets and writers and painters, and John Heyer who had quite a background in film, and I thought, no way can I match all of these university people, the only way is to beat them with work. And one of my fortes was being able to work two and three days straight and, consequently, I got more work done than the average person there. I remember, I think it was on either *Outback Patrol* or the *Crocodile Hunters*, I went to work on the Monday morning and came home on the Friday night and had no sleep through that period, just worked straight through.

Q: What did you like about filmmaking in the outback?

LR: Generally speaking, I found myself most comfortable in the backblocks. Seemed to me that you were really finding an extension of the sort of fellows that you found in the war, they were the same type of people and mostly were country fellows anyway. Also, I think that the thing that greatly attracted me was the fact that I could see so many blatant opportunities for film. I could have put up 20 more subjects for appraisal at that time and kept doing it year after year because I really felt that was where the character of the country lies.

Q: Tell me about location shooting, the adventure.

LR: There was a certain amount of high adventure about a number of the films that we did and the fact that we were just two-man teams that were able to go in the bark canoes with the Aboriginal people catching crocodiles with their bare feet and go onto pearling luggers and go out day after day after day. And things like *Outback Patrol* and *Bush Policeman*, which were quite new worlds opening up to me. There was always a great sense of 'this story has got to be told'. Nobody ever liked the pictures more than I liked making them. They were a grand exercise and, you felt that, in 50 years time somebody will be looking at some of them and seeing how it was 50 years ago.

Apart from finding the subject matter absolutely absorbing, the outback presented us with something that Hollywood couldn't challenge. We kept out of

the studios because we only had the one studio anyway and it was totally inadequate. Any time we went to the studio, we were pitting ourselves against the Americans and the British and the French and we knew we could never handle it. But any time that we got out on location that gave us wide open spaces, nobody could better us.

Q: When you went out to the outback, it was well before tourists would have really travelled those areas, wasn't it?

LR: Sometimes I wonder how much of a disservice we might have done to, particularly, the centre - because recently visiting there, I was just amazed at the difference between when we first went there. You'd go into the Underdowns Pub to have a beer and you could hear the clink of spurs on the footpath and people shooting one another in the street, and all sorts of marvellous and unusual things going on. And among it all would be the odd tourist. We'd come into Alice Springs to stay at the Underdowns Hotel for the weekend and pick up fresh stock and so on, and there might be four or five visitors staying there. But the last time I went there, I was just amazed that everywhere you looked there were people with backpacks and every way you turned there were foreign languages being spoken, and I think sometimes I might have been part of knocking out that old image, you know.