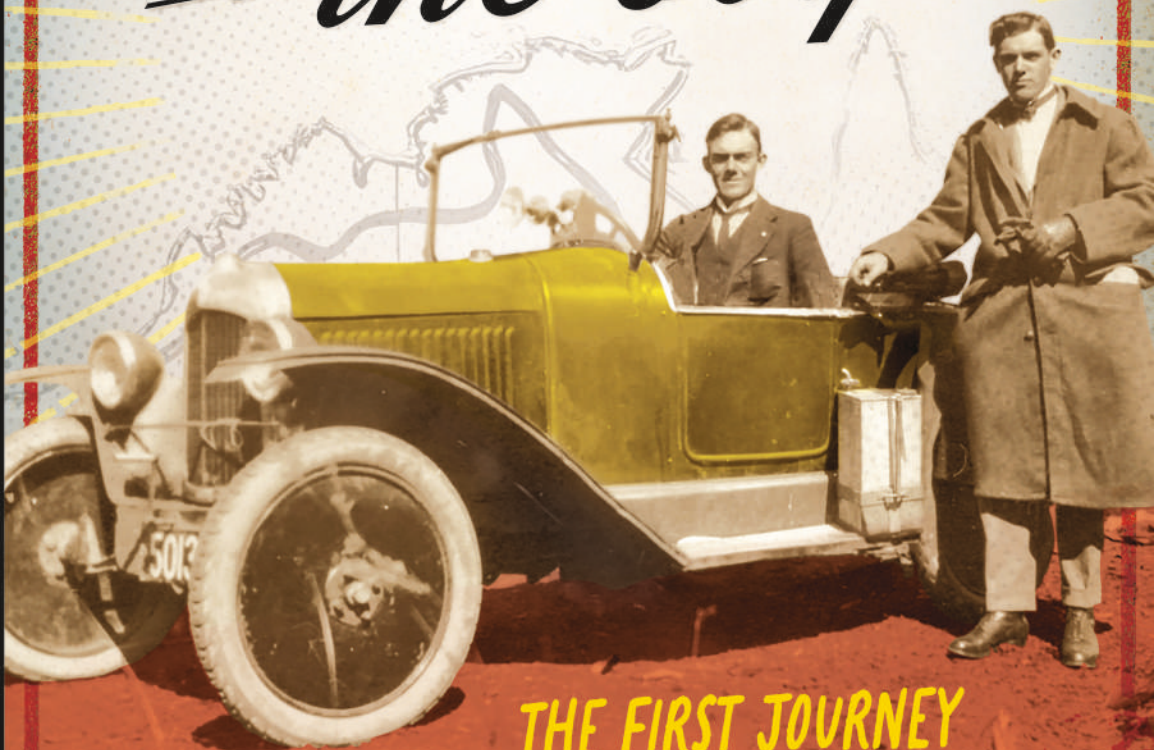


BUBSIE

and the boys



THE FIRST JOURNEY
AROUND AUSTRALIA BY CAR

DAVID RILEY

Dedication

To my wife Joanne and three children: Jessica, Kea and Ted.
You've been wonderful companions on our travels together.

To my eldest daughter, Jessica (2007–2025).
Brain cancer brought an early end to this life for you,
but there will be no end to your adventures in the next one.

And to every person who already has, currently is or will
one day travel this magnificent southern continent.
May there be more beauty and less terror.

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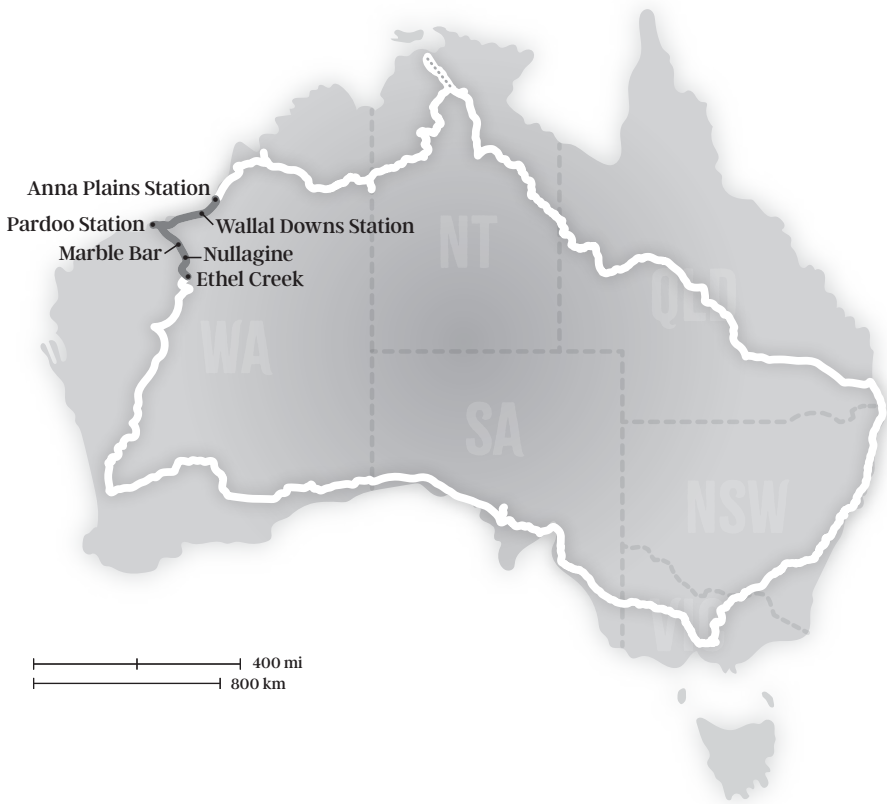
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Ethel Creek to Anna Plains

Sunday morning began a little slower than the boys had planned. Greg and Nevill wanted Bubsie on the road early, but Mrs Smith had prepared a large breakfast. She was enjoying the company, and it would have been rude not to stay at Ethel Creek a little longer.

During the meal, Nevill told their hosts he hoped to reach Broome by the end of the week. Everyone agreed the 900-kilometre drive was achievable in six days, but only if the Madman's Track was in a fit state

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and Bubsie's mechanics held together. The family from Port Hedland offered to take Nevill and Greg's mail and post it on their long drive back to the coast.

While the boys organised Bubsie, Mr Smith gave them directions to follow Ethel Creek's northern track. He told Nevill and Greg to purchase some provisions at the Roy Hill general store, then follow the telegraph line for the next two days up to the town of Shellborough on the coast. According to Mr Smith, once Bubsie reached the Indian Ocean, Nevill and Greg could start on the Madman's Track. From there, it would be about three days to drive to Broome—perhaps longer if there were difficulties. The station manager joked with the boys that it was best if they kept the Indian Ocean on their left as they drove north.

Leaving Ethel Creek, the five-hour drive to the town of Nullagine took Bubsie through the undulating country of the Martu people. There were still tinges of green in the sporadic grass from the unusually late autumn rains, and the flat-top mesas in the distance added to the sense of remoteness.

The gold rush of the 1890s had been good for Nullagine. It turned the town from lonely desert to a community of 3000 people within months of the first nugget's discovery.

Nevill and Greg canvassed Nullagine for book sales, then drove Bubsie on towards Marble Bar. The slow ascent through the hills meant Bubsie was rarely out of second gear. At sunset, the boys rolled out their swags on the side of the road, and a small fire saw them through the cool night up on the range.

When Bubsie pulled into Marble Bar the following morning, the town was still reeling from an unwanted record secured the previous year. The locals had endured 160 consecutive days where the temperature topped 100 or more using the Fahrenheit measurement (38 degrees Celsius). As a result, Marble Bar had been crowned the hottest town in Australia.

Nevill asked at the post office for directions to Lucy Brandt's house and dropped by to say hello. His parents had known Lucy in South Australia when she was a young girl and had stayed in contact with her after she married a horse driver and moved to Meekatharra. Lucy and her husband had then moved even further north to Marble Bar in search of regular work.

After introductions with Greg, Nevill gave Mrs Brandt an update on the welfare of the Westwood family down south. Lucy was in her mid-30s, but with tough living under a harsh outback sun she looked older. Her clothing had that unavoidable hue of Pilbara red, from the region's dirt crawling in between each fibre and staining every seam.

Lucy was keen to ask about the Westwood family's conversion to Adventism. Having been raised Anglican, she didn't feel any need to question her own faith, but she was intrigued about why an upright family like the Westwoods might want to join the Seventh-day Adventists. The two young missionaries shared a little of their beliefs, and Nevill reached into the back of Bubsie and handed the woman a small booklet on the hope found in Christ. Lucy said she would take a look. Marble Bar never had anything new to read anyway.

The boys said their farewells, and Lucy Brandt gave the boys directions out to the local swimming hole. Three kilometres out of town a massive seam of jasper quartz jutted out into the Coongan River, trapping the summer rains all through a dry winter. Brilliant streaks of red, white and brown silica danced out of the hillside and dazzled in the hot sun. Those in Marble Bar called this swimming hole "the permanent pool" and it was a spectacular place to cool off. Back in the town's early gold rush days, the jasper in the landscape had been confused for marble and as a result the name Marble Bar was coined.

Nevill and Greg welcomed the cooling swim on a warm day. Just two weeks earlier, the boys had left Perth in the south wearing their winter coats and now they were swimming under a deep blue sky. Pink cockatoos with flashes of red and orange squawked in the nearby trees. There are occasions during long road trips where the distances covered are worth all the effort, and this was one of those times. Nevill and Greg took a couple of photos of their surrounds to send back to family, but pictures never capture a feeling—they're simply a reminder you once felt it.

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The boys cranked up Bubsie and headed back towards Marble Bar. Connecting with the telegraph line again, they turned left up towards the coast. It was 150 kilometres to Shellborough and they would need to cross the De Grey River to get there. Like many of the rivers up this way, the De Grey was dry this time of year—but the crossing was 100 metres wide over soft sand. Nevill pushed as Greg drove, and Bubsie's light frame had no difficulty reaching the other side.



Bubsie and the boys reached Shellborough soon after nine o'clock that evening. The old pearling town was in decline and was now just a telegraph station, a post office and a couple of sleeping quarters. Two years after Bubsie's visit, the town was closed and the buildings relocated down to Port Hedland. The government left nothing in Shellborough but a few lime-and-shell-grit stumps to say this had once been a busy port and bustling community.

The wise choice would have been to spend the night in Shellborough, but sensible decisions are not always a hallmark of 21-year-olds on long road trips. With only a thin sliver of a moon to help light their way, the boys decided to make a start on the track heading further north. It would not take long before they realised their enthusiasm was misguided.

The Madman's Track was officially known as the Broome Road, but calling it a road was like calling little Bubsie a limousine. The Madman's was basically two ruts channelled into the coastal sands by ox-pulled carts. A cyclone earlier that year had made sections of the road indiscernible from the sand dunes and nearby beaches. The paths leading off the Madman's into the coastal cattle stations were in better condition than the official road due to more frequent use by the pastoralists. All this meant it was easy to lose the road and head off in the wrong direction. Travellers tricked into taking the wrong track eventually dead-ended at lonely windmills and had to backtrack. The Madman's Track was a bumpy, bone-rattling, chassis-twisting mess.

The road had first gained its notoriety during the late 1870s when gold was discovered near the settlement of Roebourne. Within months, the small town grew to having the biggest population between Perth

and Darwin. Fortune-hunters with money and sense caught boats to Roebourne to join in the scramble. But the poor pearlers up north in Broome had to gather their earthly possessions in a tea towel and “waltz Matilda” south along the coast for 800 kilometres. It was considered insane to walk that distance in scorching temperatures, with no reliable waterholes for most of the way. If you weren’t a madman when you started the track, you probably would be by the end. That is, if you were fortunate enough to reach the end.

Nevill and Greg had made a mistake dismissing five decades of pain by setting off on the road in the middle of the night. Within 20 minutes of leaving Shellborough, the boys were lost.

Greg stood up in the car and peered into the darkness. The faint glow of moonlight and Bubsie’s dim headlights gave him nothing. He jumped out and scrambled up a nearby ridge but still saw no obvious road. Greg then lit a large clump of spinifex grass which burned brightly and died out quickly—an appropriate metaphor for their naive enthusiasm in attempting the Madman’s Track in the middle of the night. Still seeing nothing, the solution to Nevill and Greg’s problem became obvious. This was the spot they would camp for the evening and wait for the morning sunrise.



Around these parts, the Western Australian coastline is north-facing for a stretch of almost 300 kilometres. This meant Nevill and Greg witnessed something the following morning they had never seen before—a rising sun over the Indian Ocean.

With the morning light, the boys were able to rediscover the track they needed. They were only 30 kilometres from the Pardoo Station homestead, but with holes in the road a metre deep at times, their progress was slow. The station staff were surprised when little Bubsie bounced into the homestead around eight that morning, and they invited the boys to join them for the morning meal.

Over breakfast, Nevill shared with the staff some of the Adventist Church’s work among the poor and the purpose of Bubsie’s trip to Darwin. The manager at Pardoo took off his hat and turned it upside down on the table, telling everyone to make a donation. Despite the

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fact that Pardoo was still clearing up from the previous summer's cyclone, the boys collected well over £4—almost two weeks wages for an unmarried man. Nevill thanked them for their generosity and promised to wire the money to Perth at the next opportunity.

The boys checked Bubsie for any damage or loosened screws caused by the Madman's. Despite the track giving the car a hammering, Bubsie was still looking good. The boys farewelled Pardoo and motored out towards Wallal Downs Station, hoping to make the 150-kilometre trek by sunset. Nevill and Greg had learned their lesson from the previous night and would not travel after dark again.

The boys noticed the surrounding landscape changing from the overwhelming redness of the Pilbara to an occasional green swathe of grassland. Bubsie was entering the southern edges of the more tropical Kimberley region—an area the size of California that stretches east from the Indian Ocean over stunning terrain to the Northern Territory border.

During the day's drive from Pardoo to Wallal, the boys passed through close to 20 gates—including the famous Number 1 Rabbit Proof Fence. This section of the fence was almost 2000 kilometres long. The barrier didn't stop the destructive march of its namesake, but at least it slowed the rabbits down a little. This was a gate the boys made sure they closed tight.

The weather that Tuesday was hot. They were on a stretch of coastline called Eighty Mile Beach, a spatially inaccurate name given the beach is closer to 140 miles (225 kilometres) long. Whenever the road veered close to the beach, the boys took the opportunity to cool themselves down in the water. Nevill later told family: "We spent hours swimming or wandering around in nothing more than a shirt."

During the afternoon, Greg had an idea. Their rough ride was exaggerated because Bubsie's width was narrower than the two wheel ruts of the Madman's. Greg suggested to Nevill that they remove each of Bubsie's wheels, turn them around, then place them back on the same axle with the inside of the wheel facing out. Greg reckoned it would give the vehicle extra track width. The boys pulled Bubsie over, jacked up the car and made the change. The idea worked. They now had an extra 13 centimetres of width between the wheels. This more standard track helped to level Bubsie's ride, making the experience easier for the boys.

The boys timed their run well and they slipped into Wallal Downs just before nightfall. The sheep station ran its herds on over half a million acres of land, and its boundaries stretched east from the Indian Ocean to the edges of the Great Sandy Desert. In 1925, Wallal Downs was managed by a group of returned soldiers from the Great War. The hard yakka and common cause kept them busy and sane. The sense of shared purpose on the station helped prevent the veterans turning their issued rifles on themselves as some of their comrades had done when they returned from fighting in Europe.

Just three years before Bubsie's arrival, the location of Wallal Downs had been big news around the world. The total solar eclipse of 1922 had been centred on Eighty Mile Beach, and Wallal's homestead was pivotal in providing hospitality to a team of academic heavies from around the world. Tons of astronomical equipment landed on the nearby beach to run scientific observations. Even the Australian navy sent one of its warships to help with security and logistics.

The world's scientific community used the eclipse to test a young Albert Einstein's General Theory of Relativity. The data collected at Wallal eventually proved Einstein's theory was accurate, and dramatically altered humanity's understanding of physics and astronomy.

When Bubsie rolled into Wallal, the homestead was in disrepair from the cyclone earlier in the year. It was difficult for the boys to picture the devastated place as the centre of the scientific universe only three years earlier.

After dinner, Greg and Nevill decided to camp outside beside Bubsie. The boys were completely worn out from the day's drive, and as the saying goes, a tired dog is a happy dog. Sleep came easily under a canopy of Kimberley stars.



The next morning, the motoring missionaries thanked their hosts at Wallal for their hospitality. Nevill and Greg were especially appreciative for the fuel the soldiers had given them. Nevill offered to pay but the returned servicemen would hear nothing of it. The fuel was crucial if they were to make the 200 kilometres north to the next homestead at Anna Plains.

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The Madman's Track continued to be slow going and it took the boys most of the morning to travel only 30 kilometres. Bubsie stopped briefly at The Dip, a depot where a lone government employee dispensed modest provisions to the local Nyangumarta people. To the government in Perth, the occasional gift of tea, sugar, flour and blankets seemed like adequate compensation for the dispossession of their land.

Late in the afternoon, the boys noticed the odour of petrol, as well as some dampness around their feet. The small cylindrical fuel tank located behind the Citroën's dashboard had developed a leak. The constant twisting and jolting on the rough road had cracked the metal tank's soldered seams. The situation was a problem for Bubsie and the boys. The Madman's Track, already devoid of options for fuel, would devour a car with a leaky petrol tank.

Nevill and Greg siphoned the remaining fuel back into a spare container so nothing more would be lost. It was late in the day and they decided to camp there on the track. Apart from the government worker at The Dip, the boys had not seen any sign of civilisation all day. Nevill and Greg reminded themselves of a promise in the Bible: "Your concerns may endure for an evening, but joy shall come in the morning." A good night's rest would hopefully bring a solution to their predicament on the morrow.

Early the next morning, Nevill and Greg jerry-rigged a rubber hose from one of the fuel tins directly into Bubsie's carburettor. The bypassing of the leaky fuel tank did the trick, and the trio continued along the Madman's at a slow, jolting pace. But within a few hours, the temporary hosing deteriorated as it came in contact with the fuel. The boys had to find another solution to keep Bubsie moving.

Their petrol was now running low and they were still 60 kilometres from Anna Plains Station. They had spilled too much of Wallal's fuel provision along the track. Nevill transferred their remaining petrol back into Bubsie's leaky tank, and Greg cranked the Citroën back into action. Nevill sat in the driver's seat and leaned forward under the dashboard. Using the fingers on his left hand, Nevill felt for the cracks in the tank's seam, doing his best to plug them.

In this awkward position, Nevill could steer the car while preventing most of the petrol from leaking out of the tank, but it left him unable to see the track. So, Greg stood on Bubsie's running board and looked down road, calling out instructions to Nevill. Bubsie and the boys drove in this manner at a slow pace for another 30 kilometres. Greg was the eyes watching out for termite mounds and deep ruts, and Nevill the blind driver under the dashboard steering the little Citroën according to Greg's commands.

When Bubsie finally ran out of fuel, it was a relief to Greg and Nevill. Their tandem driving charade had lost its novelty rather quickly, and in the hot sun the boys had quickly become frustrated. The Madman's Track was living up to its name.

Anna Plains Station would surely have fuel, but it was 30 kilometres further up the coast. There was only one solution to their current dilemma. The boys grabbed their can of brackish water and began their seven-hour trudge up the sandy track.

The heat and discomforts of their walk to Anna Plains were mitigated by cooling swims in the Indian Ocean just over the ridge. Despite their fatigue, the boys reassured each other with the fact they only had to walk this remote track for a day. The gold prospectors walking down from Broome a few decades ago walked it for three weeks.

Greg and Nevill stumbled into Anna Plains in the darkness of Thursday night. The boys were "met with great hospitality at the station" and enjoyed a wash-down, a warm meal and a wonderful sleep.



After breakfast the next morning, the station manager, Frank McMullens, drove Greg and Nevill back down the Madman's in his truck and towed the Baby Citroën to the homestead at Anna Plains. There, the boys removed the compromised fuel tank from under the dashboard. Greg heated up some solder and applied it to the cracks, then reattached the tank to the car.

The jolting track had not only damaged the fuel tank but had also worked over Bubsie's leaf-spring suspension. The car was sagging a little in the rear and the back tyres were rubbing on the mudguards. They discussed returning the reversed wheels to their original position to help

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reduce the friction but decided to wait until they were in Broome and off the Madman's.

Frank McMullens invited Nevill and Greg to stay at the station as long as they needed, telling the boys he would be thankful for their company.



Greg and Nevill's Sabbath rest that Saturday was spent observing the station's employees. Mr McMullen had a handful of white men staffing Anna Plains, with most of the station's stockmen being Kardjari people from the northern part of the station and Nyangumarta people from the south. The lands of a number of Indigenous nations had been seized by the pastoralists to run their 15,000 Shorthorn cattle at Anna Plains.

In return, the Kardjari and Nyangumarta stockmen received only food and clothing rations for their labour. The occasional disagreement between the two language groups—mainly due to different cultural protocols—perplexed the station's white employees. Pastoralists in the 1920s were surprised to discover that beliefs, practices and languages varied widely among their Indigenous workers depending on their community and nation.

Frank McMullen told Nevill and Greg that the vegetation this far north was too sparse to run sheep. This meant Bubsie would be travelling through cattle country the rest of the way to Darwin. The lack of flora around Anna Plains also meant a mouth full of dirt was guaranteed whenever a gust of wind or small willy-willy blew. Mr McMullen joked with the boys that life at Anna Plains would be lonely without all the dust.

Nevill and Greg planned to drive the remaining 200 kilometres to Broome the following day. They were expecting to be there for a week selling books and exploring the possibility of a future church outpost this far north in Western Australia.

What the boys were not expecting in Broome was a chance encounter with one of the strangest explorers of Australia the country had ever known.