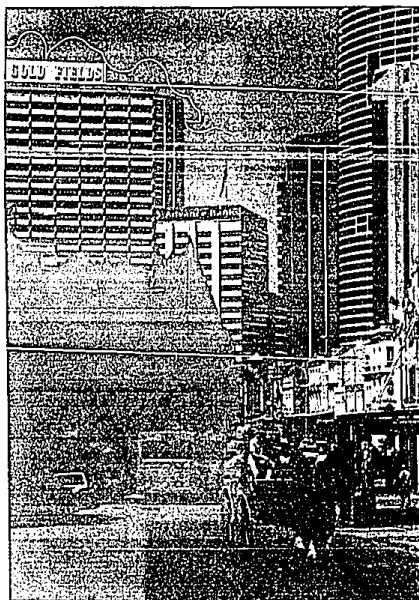




Photos by MICKY JONES

Much of Australia's 16 million residents can be found along the coastal crescent stretching from Sydney in South Wales to Melbourne in Victoria Province and Adelaide in South Australia Province.

'Waltzing, Matilda' across the Outback



Sydney Harbor Bridge, the opera house and the Sydney Tower add to the cosmopolitan flavor of Sydney, Australia's New York City.

By Iris Sanderson Jones
staff writer

"Once a jolly swagman sat beside by a billabong/Under the shade of the coolibab tree . . ."
I've seen quite a few coolibab trees today, rough-barked eucalyptus trees growing at an angle over the red desert landscape of the Outback. They throw a decent patch of dark shade, sometimes beside the road, sometimes over a dry river bed. Just what a vagabond needs after carrying a swag all day in the hot sun.

I haven't seen any swagmen, or many other living souls, on this deserted road, but I have seen a lot of kangaroos, sound asleep in the shade of a tree until the sound of our van sends them hopping away, tails pumping, through the olive green saltbush that covers the rust red ground to the horizon.

"And he sang as he sat and waited while his billy boiled/You'll come a waltzing, Matilda, with me."

I always thought a billabong was a patch of wet river; it must have been in the green mountains east of here where Andrew "Banjo" Paterson lived when he wrote "Waltzing, Matilda" in 1895. He was celebrating all those wandering sheep and cattle drovers and the dreamers on their way to fame and fortune in Australia's gold and silver mines.

BANJO'S SWAGMAN drowned in the billabong, but he couldn't do it here. A billabong in this part of Australia is nothing but the shallow gully left behind when the river changes course. Like most of the waterbeds in the Outback, it is either dry or in flood.

You can approach the Broken Hill area by train aboard the Indian Pacific, or by car, but the best overall picture of this setting is from the air, when you fly the 500 miles due west from cosmopolitan coastal city of Sydney to the desert mining town of Broken Hill, "capital of the Outback."

The Barrier Mountains, which barred the western migration of pioneers for decades after the first convict colonies were settled near Sydney, drop abruptly out of mountain green trees into desert. The red land and olive green saltbush spread to the horizon. Every 50 or 100 miles a sheep station, what we would call a ranch, rises out of a seraglio of trees; in most cases, 5,000 sheep range across 100,000 very dry acres.

Broken Hill, a town of 14,000 people and site of one of the richest lead and silver mines in the world, is the capital of this part of the Outback. From there, the School of the Air teaches students, sitting by short-wave radios on distant sheep stations. Families come to shop in town and to send their adolescent children away to private schools.

The Flying Doctor School planes are based at the Broken Hill airport, regularly carrying doctors and nurses into the Outback to give medical care.

BROKEN HILL is also an important cultural center. Rich miners established an excellent art gallery at the turn of the century and their successors encouraged artists to settle in the desert.

Most of the tours into this part of the Outback include trips out of Broken Hill to the lakes formed by the



While kangaroos are a novelty to visitors, they can be dangerous and a garden pest, according to Australians.

Darling River Project, which literally waters the desert; the aborigine cave drawings at Noolbungle National Park; the historic opal mines at White Cliffs; and the tiny nearby desert towns, especially the ghost town of Silverton.

"Doom came a jumbuck to drink beside the billabong, and up jumped the swagman and seized him with glee/And he sang as he stowed that jumbuck in his tucker bag/You'll come a waltzing, Matilda, with me."

You have probably figured out by now that "waltzing Matilda" means walking the roads with a pack on your back. You would never figure out that a jumbuck is a sheep, the kind you see grazing on the salt bush as you drive down the black-topped or the red-dirt roads of the Outback.

You don't spend much time looking at the sheep, however, not when the ostrich-like emus are racing the van at 60 miles an hour, their feathered skirts flying behind them. Not when there are kangaroos sitting and sleeping under every tree. Not when the van driver stops regularly to say "frill-necked lizard on the road ahead," or maybe "snake."

THERE ARE so many kangaroos in this country that Outbackers have heavy steel bars on the front of their vehicles, like the cattle bars you sometimes see in American cow country. Aussies call them "roo bars."

Locals don't drive out of town at night unless they have to because they are always running into kangaroos. Or more likely, the kangaroos are always jumping into them.

The only traffic on our road today is an occasional car, or maybe a sheep drover on a motorcycle, his faithful dog sitting behind him.

A vagabond with a little money is called a tourist, and rides a van, so we were "waltzing Matilda" into the ghost mining town of Silverton, when we met a real swagman for the first time. If you saw the movies "Mad Max" or "A Town Like Alice" you've seen Silverton, because parts of them were filmed here.

Deserted stone buildings are scattered up a dry slope and tourists ride camels for fun. (That's how they explored this Great Australian Desert, by camel.)

Eighty people live in Silverton now, catering to tourists and providing a setting for the occasional movie. Locals, tourists and movie stars all end up at the Silverton Hotel, where Misty the Mare stands in the shade under the overhanging porch roof.

Come on in and have a cold beer, look at the pictures on the wall and read the clippings about movies that have been shot in Silverton. Watch the famous cockatoo drink beer out of a can. Watch Misty the Mare stick her head in the door, or even wander up the bar, but don't offer him a drink. Colin McLeod doesn't allow her to drink beer.

IT'S A FUN way to spend an afternoon, but you don't think of it as real life until you meet Colin McLeod.

Colin is an attractive gray-haired man who would look just as much at home in a suit and tie on a city street as he does in his plaid shirt, serving beer behind the bar in Silverton.

Colin was a "ringer," a cowboy to us Americans, in the Northern Territories, when he had a run-in with a scrub bull many years ago. That's a bull that "went to bush," as the Aussies say.

He was a swagman, riding a chestnut horse called Flyaway. The bull gored the horse. The horse fell on top of Colin. And as Colin says, "then the bull had a go at me." He was three days' ride from his sheep station.

"You have to understand how big a station is in Australia," Colin said. "Your King Ranch in America is about 2,500 square miles. We'd call that a horse paddock. We've got ranches that are 15,000 square miles. The one I was on is 8,000 square miles."

Colin was lucky. Somebody found him. He rode three days on the back of a buckboard and then they flew him out by the Flying Doctor service. Now he and his wife Innes run this pub, which once belonged to Innes' father.

I asked Colin to describe a swag. "A swag is a piece of material about eight by ten feet. It's like a cowboy's bedroll, only it's bigger and it's folded different," he said. "A swagman carries it on foot or on his horse, and he also carries a tucker bag for his food."

WELL, YOU probably know the rest of "Waltzing, Matilda" — how the troopers came down and bagged the swagman for stealing the sheep and how the swagman jumped into the billabong so he wouldn't get caught.

"You'll never catch me alive," he cried.

"And his ghost may be heard as you ride beside billabong/You'll come a waltzing, Matilda, with me."

You'd have a hard time drowning yourself in a billabong around here, but if you want to waltz a little Matilda with the few other travelers who come this way, contact your travel agent or Tourism Australia, 2121 Avenue of the Stars, Suite 1210, Los Angeles, Calif. 90067.



The Aborigines are the first known inhabitants of Australia and their artwork can be found throughout the country.