

A BETTER PLACE TO LIVE

Making the Top End a new kind of community



Diana Giese

*'The skyline was dominated by the vandalized bulk of
the meatworks'*

Paul Hasluck



Vestey's Meatworks, Bullocky Point, Darwin, 1957.

(source: PH0049/0152, Fay Cheater, Cheater Collection, NT Library and Information Service, Darwin)

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In the early 1950s, Darwin still lay in the ruins of World War II. The Esplanade was full of grass the height of a man, and littered with debris left by the departed troops. The business heart, Chinatown, had been burnt and looted, razed to ground-level rubble and overgrown with weeds. A single house had been built since 1945,¹ and water and electricity were only available at intervals each day.² ‘Doctors Gully was a junkyard. The old post office was a roofless ruin. The Harbour had not been cleared of the wrecks left by the wartime raids,’ sixty-four of them. The skyline ‘was dominated by the vandalized bulk of the meatworks’.³

These were the impressions of Paul Hasluck on a 1951 tour of the town. He was on the threshold of becoming the long-serving Minister for Territories.⁴

The American and Australian forces that had linked Darwin to the international War effort were gone. There were shortages of everything, and few services. It was hard to find a place to live. Mary Lee remembers her family simply moving into an abandoned Army hut, with rusty galvanized iron walls and roof, white-ant-eaten wood, and a dirt floor, and claiming it as their home. The barn-like space was partitioned with ‘a bit of curtain’ for a stab at privacy, there were push-out windows, and the gap under the

walls let in armies of wildlife, including snakes and centipedes. Her family chopped wood to feed the stove and the copper.⁵

For those of Aboriginal and Islander background, surviving often meant feeding themselves. They knew the country contained abundant resources of game, fish and birds, as well as dozens of edible plants. They hunted geese, wallabies and turtles, fished and crabbed. Don Bonson remembers that ‘We had to live off the land. You had to stretch the dollar.’⁶ He recalls going out with his father on a bush track to shoot geese at Holmes Jungle, near today’s suburb of Leanyer. There were no restrictions on how many birds could be taken. ‘In those days when a flock of geese lifted, it blackened out the sky. There were thousands of them.’ He remembers baking turtles in their own juices; cooking up dugong with vinegar and ginger, garlic and lemongrass; and enjoying stingray for its rich fishy taste. Food in the big family camps involved the kind of fusion cooking that only became fashionable decades later elsewhere in Australia.

Long before multiculturalism became official policy, big ‘mixed’ families, whose fathers and grandfathers had come to Australia to work in pearling or mining, were living lives which drew on many different traditions. They stuck together to support one another through good times and bad. Lack of accommodation forced people to pitch in together in the ex-Army camps. Greeks and Italians joined Islanders, Malays, Indonesians and others of every kind of mix and blend. There were over 3000 people in Parap alone.⁷ There were also camps at Mindil Beach, and in the rickety skeleton of Vestey’s Meatworks at Bullocky Point. A cheerful cacophony of languages could be heard in Darwin’s streets and dwellings. Terry Lew Fatt, of Chinese, Aboriginal and Filipino ancestry, born in 1937, lived at Parap with his six brothers and three sisters, with other large families such as the Ahmats, Angeles,

Cadonas, Cubillos, Hazelbanes, Muirs and Roes.⁸ Ted Milliken noted that Darwin would not have functioned without them: ‘they were in all the jobs that created the infrastructure for living’, the roads, the railway and the wharf.⁹

Meat for non-hunters and fishers came up on the train once a week. There was no fresh milk, so everyone used powdered. Newspapers including *The Sydney Morning Herald* and magazines such as *The Australian Women’s Weekly* were flown in, days late. The ABC was the only radio station in those pre-TV days. There was always a sense of being slightly behind what was going on in the rest of the world.

In 1954, my family arrived in Darwin. My father Harry Giese’s first office, in his big new job as Director of Welfare with the Northern Territory Administration, was an unlined Sidney Williams hut. It was hidden by the bright yellow flowers and luxuriant foliage of an allamanda vine which overwhelmed the fragile man-made structure. He and his staff sweltered in the heat.

Darwin minimally existed. There were a few streets of shops, a school and a couple of churches, most in a rundown state. There seemed to be two towns. There was the vibrant, ramshackle inter-War place held in the memories of old-timer families, many of whom were returning to claim what had been theirs before they had been evacuated to other states. Then there was the clean remodelled vision of the future proposed by the new planners.

Amid the rubble was a stubborn sense of hope for a better future. Keeping in mind those enduring problems, distance, isolation and the vast scale of the Territory, one-fifth of the Australian continent, but buoyed by the optimism of the post-War years and the possibility of building a new world, Australians resurrected northern development as an important guiding concept.

As part of post-War reconstruction, surely a fresh start could be made, in many promising directions? There was a new Administrator, F.J.S. Wise, the ex-Labor Premier of Western Australia, with wide experience in legislative management and a professional background in tropical agricultural science. There was a new head of the new Department of Territories in Canberra. In 1947 a partly-elected Legislative Council had been set up in Darwin. After years of government neglect, citizens felt they could demand and get more say in how the north was governed.

Big dreams were possible — and many would be realized. The people of the Top End wanted better schooling and further education, so that more families would be encouraged to settle. Decent health care should be available to all, and debilitating tropical diseases eradicated. New and reorganized service and sporting and cultural organizations for pleasure and relaxation would make life worth living. A dream of many was of a dynamic civil society based on effective government and a strong economy, where family, faith, voluntary association and culture could flourish.¹⁰

Gradually, the 1950s and 60s were to develop into times of change and progress. With country-wide prosperity, the mining and pastoral industries boomed, as communications and transport improved. The European population of the Territory increased as more jobs became available. Aboriginal and ‘part-Aboriginal’ people were offered new opportunities, including working for equal pay.

Under Administrator Wise, from 1951–56, Commonwealth spending more than doubled, and works expenditure more than tripled. Commercial investment reached over three million pounds.¹¹ Inadequate electricity and water supplies were improved. Money was spent on moving single public servants out of hutment camps such as ‘Belsen’ and into hostels, and families into houses.

A housing loan scheme to assist private house builders was set up. 'Wise's administration was a turning point in the Territory's post-war history,' said Hasluck.¹²

Wise's successor, J.C. Archer (1956–61) added expertise in administration, making the Public Service more efficient.¹³ He was joined by Reg Marsh, first as Government Secretary, then as Assistant Administrator, from 1953–62. Dynamic and progressive, Marsh played a key role in setting up the Darwin Municipal Council in 1957, and initiating statutory authorities such as the Housing Commission and the Port Authority.¹⁴

Cattle at this time was the major product of the Territory. The Lands Department under Hugh Barclay revised the tenure system for pastoral holdings to give greater security, and surveyed roads. The Animal Industry Branch re-opened and improved stock routes to railheads and meatworks. By 1956 there were 5000 kilometres of serviced routes, and also stock inspectors to monitor yards and diseases. During the Dry season, some 160,000 cattle could be on the move across the north.

Agricultural experiments, that continuing feature of Territory life since European settlement, continued to fail, often spectacularly, as did Humpty Doo rice in the mid-50s. But if Top Enders had been able to look into the future, they would have seen a time of approaching prosperity based on the Territory's natural resources. Mining would boom. Copper, with gold, ensured that Tennant Creek remained the dominant mining region. Geological exploration and feasibility studies would abound. Big companies would exploit rich deposits of uranium at Rum Jungle, around the South Alligator River and at El Sharana. Manganese from Groote Eylandt and bauxite from Gove would be extracted over twenty years.

In the mid-60s, when iron ore was found at Frances Creek, a contract would be signed with the Japanese to export three million tons of ore. At the beginning of 1968, Nabalco would set up its alumina refinery at Nhulunbuy.¹⁵

Sharing this increasing wealth became over the years an issue intertwined with the rights of Aboriginal people on whose tribal land much of the exploration and extraction would occur. As early as 1952, the Mining Ordinance was amended so that, for the first time in Australia, indigenous people could receive benefits from the development of their land. Royalty payments of 1.25 per cent of all production at places such as Groote Eylandt and Yirrkala were paid into the Aboriginal Benefit Trust Fund.¹⁶

My mother Nancy Giese accompanied my father, Harry, to Darwin in 1954. My brother and I were children of two and seven. Harry Giese had worked in Queensland as founding Director of Physical Education, in Canberra as Commonwealth National Fitness Officer, and in training for the Public Service Board. In his early 40s, fit and energetic, he had by then travelled across Australia for his work, and was eager to set up an entirely new Branch which would develop programs for family, child and social welfare, as well as for Aboriginal Territorians.

This was a time in Territory history when citizens of many different backgrounds were banding together out of necessity, to build up the places they had chosen to make their homes. Darwin was an outpost of Canberra, a kind of colony in a country that was itself searching for a role, as the British Empire sank into slow decline. The people of the Top End needed to invent for themselves a new kind of Australian community.



Hotel Darwin, the Esplanade, 1950s.

(source: PH0024/0009, NT Souvenir Collection, NT Library and Information Service, Darwin)