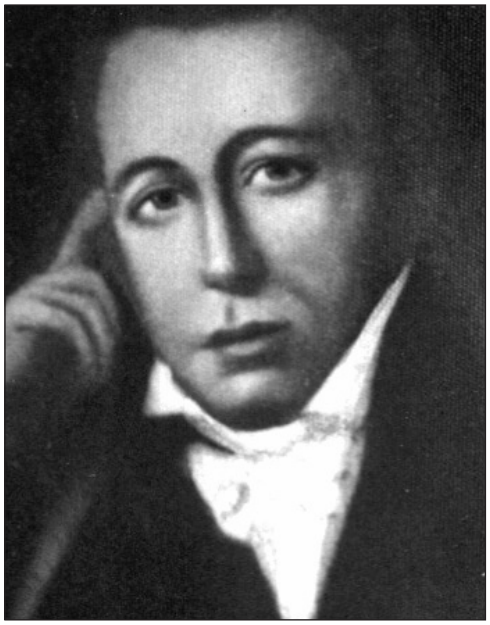

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Address

Sue Talbot
31 Horace Street,
St. Ives. 2075.

Mob: 0419 094 470

Email: suetalbot71@gmail.com

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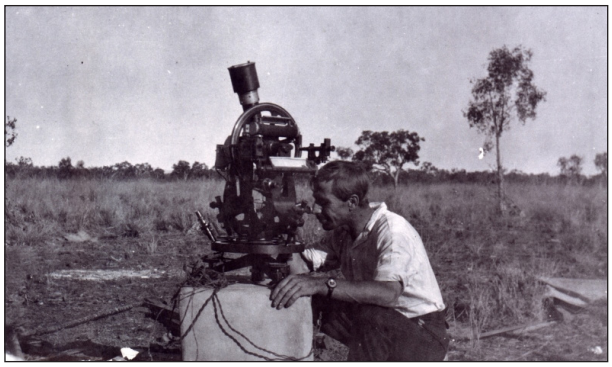
HAROLD BURNHAM CURLEWIS AND HIS PART IN DETERMINING THE BORDERS BETWEEN WESTERN AUSTRALIA AND THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

- Megan Curlewis (M) -



At left:
Harold B. Curlewis and his 12-inch theodolite

At right:
The Austral Pillar Curlewis, second from right

Photos by courtesy of the Kununurra Historical Society

The 1921 WA/NT Border Determination was a critical event in the history of Western Australia and the Northern Territory of Australia. The issue arose due to the discovery of minerals in the region, particularly gold and other valuable minerals and the need to define the border in a way that best served both interests.

It was decided that the best way of defining the border was to use a technology new for that time of wireless time signals to determine the position of the border as close to the 129th east meridian as possible.

The first stage of the work was carried out at Deakin on the Trans-Australian Railway in November 1920.

Members of the group were Harold Burnham Curlewis as Government Astronomer of Western Australia, G F Dodwell, Government Astronomer of South Australia, C.M. Hambidge, South Australian Survey Department and C A Maddern, Assistant to the Adelaide Observatory, V.D Bowen, Defence Department and J Crabb of the Survey Department.

A pillar was established to mark the spot they had determined to be the 129 degrees east.

The expedition (minus Crabb) then continued the determination in August the next year, in the Kimberley. We know more about this expedition from the diary of M P Durack who accompanied them and another account in an article in the Western Mail, Perth, 18 August 1921

From ship to Wyndham they went by car initially to Ivanhoe Station, which was subsequently resumed to make way for the Ord River Scheme and new town of Kunanurra. The track was fairly good for motoring *"but over the black boggy country it is very bumpy and diversity if also lent by the numerous creeks that have to be negotiated….The(Ord) river, making a great sweep here, is lined on one side with steep, precipitous cliffs and stretches out on the other in rocky shoals and mud-flats—the favourite basking place of alligators and crocodiles"* (Western Mail).

From Ivanhoe, they set off for Argyle station in buggy and wagons, the track which followed the valley of the Ord River being too rough, mountainous and sandy for motor cars.

On the way they passed through a number of springs such as Emu Springs, Cockatoo Springs and Napoleon Springs which fed the many creeks that they had to cross.

At Argyle Station they were met with Mr and Mrs Ambrose Durack. It was considered *"the station par excellence of the Kimberleys…the splendid cattle are seen here and there pasturing shoulder-deep in the luxuriant grass…Of the trees which grow in the Kimberley in great profusion by far the most interesting is the Boabab or bottle tree….each tree produces a prolific crop of nuts and the kernel is used as food".* (Western Mail).

The final stage of the journey from Argyle to the camp was described as "Quite a cavalcade……-three buggies, a donkey team hauling a cart containing our supplies of provisions and camping materials—the latter kindly loaned by Mr. Durack from the the station equipment, and a string of relay horses and pack-horses". (Western Mail)

Continued on page 2

Photo of Edward Smith Hall by courtesy of National Library of Australia. PIC R50 LOC Scr 86 Con 2039 by Augustus Earle.

NEW SOUTH WALES

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1.

A suitable campsite was decided upon on the east side of Rosewood Road (Rosewood being the next station to Argyle) and a wireless was erected so that they could get messages from around the world. This enabled the two instruments—Dodwell's portable transit and Curlewis's 12-inch theodolite, to be installed in position and observations for time were commenced. These were continued with-out intermission until July 7.

The special signals transmitted by Bordeaux and Lyons in France, by Annapolis—the radio station, connected with the United States Naval College, by Applecross and by the Adelaide Wireless Station enabled them to determine the error of the several clocks. Once that was done it was possible for them to fix an approximate longitude for the pillar which worked out at 8 hours, 36 minutes 5.5 seconds east of Greenwich.

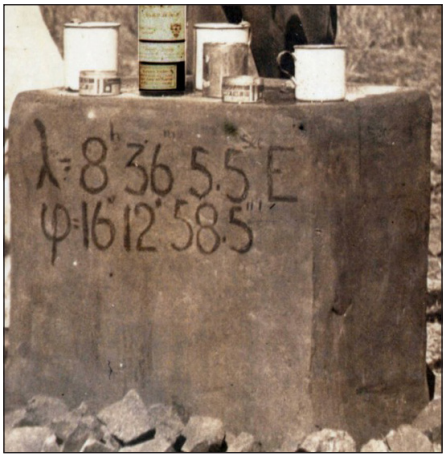
The next step was to lay a concrete pillar, named the Austral Pillar, after which they assembled around it, said a few words in connection with the work with Curlewis saying a few appropriate words in response. A little whisky was poured over the pillar, a photo commemorating the event was taken, then camp broken and back to Argyle and from thence to Wyndham.

When Curlewis returned to Perth, he said that he *"could strongly recommend the round journey Fremantle to Wyndham and back as an ideal tourist voyage. The scenery to be seen along the coast is striking and varied."*(Western Australian. Friday 29 July 1921)

This method of using wireless time signals to determine longitude had created worldwide scientific interest at the time. After the team had returned to Perth and analysed their data they realized that the Pillar that they had erected was 2km east of the border. In 1927 a team returned and the Kimberley Obelisk was erected as close as possible to 129 degrees east.

Regardless, 1921 and 1927 WA/NT Border Determination was a significant event that defined the borders between Western Australia and the Northern Territory and impacted their future development.

Postscript: Andrew Barker of the Kunanurra Historical Society visited the site of the Pillar in 2006 and provided the photo in this article, with some of the words still legible. Many thanks for Andrew for his assistance in preparing this article and permission to use the photos.



The Austral Pillar in 1921 and in recent times -
Photo by courtesy of the Kununurra Historical Society