Introduction

This paper is a companion to the lecture Growing Up in the Pastoral Frontier, which I delivered in the 'Under the Banyan Tree' Series in September 1989. The organising question I am asking is: by concentrating on one aspect of life on cattle stations, can we find out something about the way people organised their social structures and about how the social, political and economic aspects of life have interacted?

Here, as there, I have chosen a theme from the many that present themselves in the research of the pastoral industry, as a means of examining the data to illuminate some new 'truths' about life on the cattle stations in the period 1910-1950. The theme in this paper is recreation and entertainment. What did people do in their leisure time? How was leisure defined? Who defined the time for recreation? And, because it is customary in history to examine the passage of time, I ask: what changes, if any, occurred during the period? Finally, how much of what did pass for leisure was unique or specific to the pastoral frontier?

Who will we meet in this paper? Some of the families will be familiar to those of you who have heard, or read my earlier papers on the pastoral history. Among others, Ruby Roney, Joyce
Fuller and Dorothy Hall and Mrs Johnston will once again feature. Unnamed Aboriginal families whose social structures affected the white families on cattle stations will also provide a focus.

The place? Most of the incidents in the narrative will have occurred in the area north of Tennant Creek and with the assistance of the valuable information supplied by the Johnstons about the Barkly Tableland stations, will include that district. The story will range from the Western Australian border through the Victoria River district, will shift north and include Arnhem Land, continue south and east down through the Roper district to the Barkly and reach the Queensland border.

Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning have defined leisure thus in their essay *Leisure in the Spare-time Spectrum*:

> Leisure activities are a class of activities where, more than in any other, the routine restraint of emotions can, up to a point, be relaxed publicly and with social approval. Here, an individual can find opportunities for an acute arousal of pleasurable emotions of medium strength without danger to himself or herself and without danger, or lasting commitment, to others, whereas in other spheres of life activities accompanied by strong, acute affects either commit an individual beyond the moment of strong arousal or incur grave dangers and risks-if they are not altogether blocked by the routinized subordination of immediate personal feelings to the regard for aims outside oneself. In leisure activities, the regard for oneself and especially for one's own emotional satisfaction, in a more or less public and at the same time socially approved form, can take priority over all other considerations.²

In this paper I shall use this definition as a structure for looking at the lives of cattle station people. One particular aspect of Elias and Dunning's essay is relevant. In their view there is no meaningful dichotomy work-leisure: if there is a duality then it lies in the split between constraint and relaxation, between duty and pleasure. Cattle station people's lives bear this out. The dichotomy in their lives, however, is defined as much by the physical as by the social environment.

**Now, Once a Month**

Mrs Johnston, wife of the manager of Alexandria Station on the Barkly Tablelands during the 1920s and 1930s, was one of the civilisers of the bush. She willingly played her role. She told Peter Danaher when he interviewed the Johnstons in 1981:

> You'd dress for dinner at night. You had to keep up the morale. And you'd serve coffee every night after dinner in the lounge. So women made the gracious living for those that were there. More so than they do now. The men wore their ties to dinner every night. Any boys that were home they came over dressed and wore their ties to dinner every night.³

Aboriginal girls were trained to wait at table. Mrs Johnston dressed the girls in suitable attire, complete with apron and cap. Other girls sat outside on the verandah and with the string for working the dining-room punkah hooked around their big toe would 'put their leg up and down and pull the punkah backwards and forwards to keep you cool'.⁴

Once a month Brunette Downs and Alexandria Stations had a dinner party at one or the other station. They took it in turns. Before dinner there would be some recreational activity. At Alexandria the women played tennis i.e. the wives of the manager and the bookkeeper, and the men wandered over to the jackaroos' quarters. When it was Brunette's turn people would take a boat out onto the lake. Mrs Johnston remarked that each station 'had different surroundings, so the entertainment was different'.⁵
After dinner, served in the dining room by the Aboriginal servants, coffee was served in the lounge. Then the party would play bridge or sometimes sit and have a singsong around the piano or the gramophone if there was no piano.

Ruby Roney remembered card games played at Paddy and Mariah Cahill's home at Oenpelli in the 1910s. She remembered so well that in an interview with her daughter Monica Weedon recorded in the 1980s she said:

*Cards every night, and I learnt every card game possible and I was so sick of playing cards when I left Oenpelli and went away and got married and got my own place I never played cards for years because I had a sickening of cards.*

The nursing sisters at Wimmera Home on Victoria River Downs (VRD) had card evenings at the Home and stockmen resting up at the station for a few days might wander down in the evening to play rummy or bridge. Wimmera Home received a gift for Christmas 1937 however which would have relieved any boredom they felt with games of cards. Sister Stewart who had been at the Home with Sister Langham for the two years to May 1937 sent Dorothy Allen and Joyce Falconbridge (who replaced Langham and Stewart) a game of Monopoly. Sister Langham sent six new gramophone records. Did the sisters play these records to their guests while they sat playing Sister Stewart's gift? 'Such a splendid game' wrote Dorothy Allen in a letter to head office.

These leisure activities, the dinner parties, the card nights, were also duties for the women on cattle stations. They had a responsibility to help civilise the bush. The nursing sisters had express instructions from the Australian Inland Mission, which employed them, to minister to the welfare of the single men working on stations. For the sisters, cooking for picnics, baking cakes for supper parties, organising games nights and coping graciously with parties which developed spontaneously when people just dropped in, constituted work. Accounts of their work indicate that their efforts were appreciated by the white men who enjoyed Wimmera Home's hospitality during the 1920s and 30s.

The nurses' leisure was in turn provided by others. Regularly on Saturday afternoons they went up to the main station for a game of tennis, dinner and supper. Social distinctions were maintained. Anyone less than the bookkeeper and his wife was not invited to the weekly dinners. And at dinner the sisters might find themselves seated next to a VIP!

### Lots of Visitors

Visitors to cattle stations play a very important role in the recreation and leisure activities of station people. Not only did the visitors bring with them a touch of the outside world, their presence created an opportunity for station people to offer hospitality. If the visitors were women they provided important, if spectacularly irregular, companionship for station women. Ruby Roney remembered that:

*We had lots of visitors, many VIPs. My aunt Mrs Cahill and I were the first white women to go to Amhem Land, to Oenpelli and then later on, Elsie Masson, who was the companion to Mrs Gilruth, the Administrator's wife, she came on a visit to Oenpelli. We had a lot of different men ut no other women during my stay there and I was there for five years.*

In the 1920s Lady Apsley and her companion Lady Leighton visited the Victoria River district and stayed at VRD. While there they met the first AIM sisters to come to Wimmera Home at a dinner party given by Mrs Graham, the manager's wife. Lady Apsley commented:

*Driving all that day we reached Victoria River Station about sunset, and stayed two days on Victoria River Downs Station, 13 000 square miles [33 670 square kilometres] in extent,*
which is the biggest single estate in the world. Mr & Mrs Graham have made themselves a very comfortable homestead, and have a large family, from the eldest son studying for college to the youngest about nine, and they have been living in the Territory for many years. There is quite a little community at Victoria River, in the heart of the Bush, as besides the Graham family and the station staff, there is a married bookkeeper and his wife and two mission nurses belonging to a beautiful hospital, the result of the efforts of the Australian Inland Mission. Two trained nurses are maintained there, and the benefits thus conferred are far reaching.

. . . Moreover the social addition of two charming, unmarried white women fresh from the town life is enormously appreciated by every man in the Territory, who sometimes never see a white woman from one year’s end to another.9

During the time the Johnstons were on Alexandria they entertained the Administrator of the Northern Territory and his wife once a year. At dinner one evening the Administrator was so impressed by the young Aboriginal girls waiting on the table he asked Mrs Johnston if she would allow one of them to go back to Darwin with him to work at Government House. Station people would sometimes entertain their guests by giving them a look around the country. At Oenpelli in the 1910s the Cahills took their visitors riding ‘around the beautiful country, because it is beautiful’. A trip by the station truck to an outstation or a stock camp was quite a common occurrence in the 1930s thereby sharing the delight of having visitors with other station staff. And the station diary for VRD by the mid 1950s shows that visitors were almost a daily occurrence during the Dry.

Travelling Entertainment

Sometimes the guests provided the entertainment! Reverend Chris Goy, the travelling padre for AIM, reported back to head office in October 1937 regarding his recent visit to Wimmera Home:

As the droving season is at an end there were a number of stockmen in their camps near at hand. Every night several of these chaps came up to the home. It was very hot, so we used to sit in easy chairs outside under the stars, and yarn away for hours. Some of the men are interesting characters indeed. The sisters always served the much longed for cup of tea before the guests departed. On the Sunday evening we took the organ out to our favourite spot, and I conducted a hymn sing-song and then a short service which was favourably received, some of the people from the station came down and joined us.10

Goy would have been a welcome visitor. At most stations he visited he repaired radio receivers and other essential equipment: a pressure lamp; an iron; a water pump. In 1938 Goy visited old Mr Henry Wintle who resided by himself at No.3 bore on Nicholson Station. While he was there Goy assembled and installed a radio and radio mast for Wintle who was able thenceforth to listen in on, and broadcast to, others in the district.11

But the most exciting visitor must surely have been the circus that visited VRD late in 1938. Joyce Falconbridge wrote an account of the event:

We had a visit from a circus here some weeks ago, the first ever in the history of VRD. It was of course a great event, and most of the outcamp [came] in and also the Wave Hill folk came down. It was a most unusual sight to see the strings of coloured (sic) electric lights, and hear the bright music. There were several side shows of different sorts, such as hoopla, and throwing the dart. The blacks were very interested in it all and there was much chattering and laughing amongst them. The circus itself commenced about 10 pm, after everyone had gone the rounds of everything else, and lasted for an hour and a half. It was really very good, and one young girl in particular was really wonderful on the trapeze and tightrope walking. There were all sorts of acrobatics and jumping events and we could just imagine them all being tried
out again down in the blacks camp afterwards. They showed for two nights, and took 108 pounds [$216], so they did very well. 

**Going Visiting**

Visiting, or going out, is always a good way to bring a relief to the routine of work time. And so station people in their turn became visitors. Wealthier station staff, the manager and his wife, might fly south to visit friends and relatives. Or they might, like the Martins who were on VRD in the 1930s, fly to Singapore for a holiday. AIM nursing sisters drove out to the Gordon Creek outstation to visit the manager’s wife. She, in her turn, flew home to England with her husband and son to visit family there. 

Mrs Johnston displayed some independence in the matter of visiting. Told by her husband she could not accompany him to Camooweal because the men he was going in to collect would have been drinking, she reflected on matters:

And that’s when I decided after a few years that I’d get my own car and I’d go. I always had a black girl who knew a good bit with children so we’d just go ourselves. I’d go over...if you were doing any sewing and you didn’t know ...I’d say I’ll go over to Alroy today and I’d take my sewing, or whatever I was doing, and we’d help each other. That was just that little bit different... Alroy people owned their place. They were a different kettle of fish to me. My husband was only the manager. And on Brunette, the Cottons were there. Well, they owned Brunette too, and so they were owners. So they could do what they liked and go where they liked, where I couldn’t because I was controlled by Dad and he couldn’t afford to let me go tripping around the country on my own. But they could please themselves.

In 1930 Mrs Johnston drove up to Darwin:

I must have gone up there about 1930. We drove up. Three other ladies and myself drove up by car. I can remember staying at Government House and we thought that this was fantastic. They flew the Australian flag, you know, and the British flag. They put it up in the morning and took it down at six o’clock at night. While we were there a naval ship was in and, of course, they were invited down to the ship for dinner. The officers of the naval ship came up the street with their swords over their shoulders and their white uniform up to Government House. We’d never seen anything like this and we thought it was fantastic. Of course they invited them to come and invited the party I was with to go too. All the managers’ wives in the Territory were in the party. So we went, and of course we had a beautiful time. Imagine going on to a naval ship and everything being lovely, and us never seeing anything like that. Never saw anything like it again in my life. So it was really a red letter day, as far as we were concerned.

In the same interview Mrs Johnston recalled how she entertained her children. The children played with dolls just as children in the city might; they learned to play tennis; they played, when they were young, with Aboriginal children on the station. But one of the most remarkable features of their recreation was being taken on a walk or sometimes Mrs Johnston might put them in the car and take them for a drive and let them have a look around the place.

Betty Vandeleur who was on Camfield Station from the mid ’50s to the mid ’70s said in an interview in 1982 that she took her children for a walk on Sundays. The children, two little girls, were dressed up in their Sunday best and taken out to look at a new fence or a new bore.
A Break from Routine

So far we have been looking at regular recreational and leisure activities. These are as prone to routinisation as work, as Ruby Roney's comments show, so from time to time people celebrate special events which enable them to break with the routine of ordinary weekly entertainments. Two major events will be focused on in this section:

- the Annual Christmas Eve party held at Wimmera Home in the 1930s
- Annual Picnic or Race Meetings held throughout the 1930s and again after the war.

Each year the nursing sisters would provide a supper and entertainment for the people staying at VRD over Christmas. The guest list included all of the non-Aborigines in the immediate vicinity; stockmen, drovers; Bert Drew the donkey teamster; outstation managers and their families; the station manager and his family; the bookkeeper and his wife. Most of the guests were men; on some occasions out of more than thirty guests only three or four would be women.

The party required careful planning and a lot of hard work. Hop beer was made in advance, and sometimes ginger beer as well. Cakes were baked. Close to Christmas Eve the sisters decorated Wimmera Home: in 1935 the sisters devised a colour scheme of 'red and graded greens, something bright against the Battleship Grey walls'. The same sisters decorated with red, white and blue streamers in 1936; and in 1938 Sisters Allen and Falconbridge had assistance from the 'boys' who decorated the ward with blue, green, lemon and pink streamers. That year they had a 'wide band of blue with a narrower band of pink' down the centre of the table on which stood the Christmas cake made by Joyce Falconbridge. The sisters also provided fancy hats and serviettes. One year the cake nearly did not eventuate because the 'hens refused'. 'This was soon remedied by the black house boy Syd who called on the neighbouring station Humbert River 30 miles [48 km] away and returned with five dozen eggs'.

Guests responded to the efforts the sisters made by dressing up for the party. In January 1937 Sister Langham wrote an account of Christmas Eve 1936 for Head Office.

... but oh! It was a warm evening. It is no exaggeration when we say the perspiration ran down our faces like tears. The men came resplendent in white silk shirts and cream trousers—the shirts could have been wrung out. Half way through Sister Stewart went upstairs to change her frock, the one she was wearing was so moist.

They ate supper then played games, sang and recited poetry. Sister Allen said she was 'amazed at the amount of talent... the boys are very good at songs, recitations and banjo and mouth organ solos'. The party usually lasted until past one o'clock.

On one occasion the sisters persuaded their guests (twenty three all together, twenty-two of them men) to play games: 'musical arms; Jolly miller, Drop the handkerchief and such like'. They also had 'two competitions going, one, jumbled names of the outstations, paddocks etc. on VRD (a little local colour), two, incomplete sentences "As green as... " There were twenty-four such...'.

Sister Stewart continued:

The men knew we wanted it, so they all joined in regardless of denomination in singing Grace... R.C.s well in the lead- at midnight they struck up 'Oh! Come All Ye Faithful', that is more or less universal, this was their own idea.
That year people started to go home at twelve-thirty but some stragglers stayed on till 2 am singing, yarning and finishing off the 'last of the home brew'. On Christmas Day the sisters were guests at the station where they were entertained by the manager and his family.

**Bush Race Meetings**

There were very few occasions when Aborigines and non-Aborigines joined each other in recreational activity. Important exceptions were the Annual Picnic Race Days at Ranken on the Barkly or at stations like Victoria River Downs Station. Even here, however, there were clear race and gender markers which kept people in separate groups. Special events were included for children, and still the dividing line between black and white was maintained.

On VRD there were two separate occasions. One day there were foot races and novelty races for the Aboriginal staff and athletic competitions including foot races, pole vault and long jump for the whites. The other day was an organised horse race meeting. The course for the horse races had apparently been developed in the 1920s while the Grahams were managing VRD. During her visit in 1925 Lady Aspley observed preparations for the annual race meeting:

> *Mr Graham has made a private racecourse, and racing enthusiasts ride five hundred miles [805 km] to attend his two days’ racing, which offer large sums in stake money. We were there a fortnight before the meeting, and it made one’s mouth water to see the pick of the station-bred horses which were being kept for the races. None of them were fed on corn, of course, and the only time Northern Territory horses are groomed is before a race, and none of them are shod except in very rocky country. One grey mare, standing about 16.1, was one of the most perfect looking hunters I have ever seen.*

Ten years later Sister Langham described the Sports Day activities which formed part of the annual meeting:

> *Another enjoyable day was the Blacks Sports. There were numerous visitors ('walkabout blacks'). The boys enter with great zest-running, jumping, hurdle racing, throwing cricket ball etc. The successful entrant of last mentioned threw a ball 112 yards [102 m]. The lubras are shy at coming forward- and in the Siamese Race, Sack Race-they giggle and fall over.*

In 1936 Sister Langham and her colleague Sister Stewart donated a silver cup as one of the trophies for the white events. Humbert River Station won the cup. *The Wickham Gift Shield (100 yds [91 m]-whites) was a draw between J Knox and C Shultz but finally awarded to the former. The prize was a sweepstake and shield - later that year there was a lion rampant worked in cross stitch on unbleached calico by Sister Stewart. It was originally intended for a cushion but the young folk got the idea it would do for a shield so when it was mounted on the end of a kerosene case it looked quite effective.*

Aborigines were awarded cloth, tomahawks, trinkets and sweets as prizes. Sister Allen reported that at the Sports Day in 1937 ‘The picanninies (sic) were all started off the same mark and most of them ran no further than the lolly tin. It really didn't matter which one won as they each received a handful of sweets’.  

A few days later there was the Annual Race Day which in 1937 attracted a much smaller field than usual. There were only sixteen horses entered. In Sister Allen’s opinion some of the special races for the blacks were among the best for the day.

For the nursing sisters there was a double commitment to helping out: quite naturally they would have enjoyed the gaiety of such a big social occasion; and the nursing home at VRD
often benefited financially from donations made to AIM by cattlemen attending the race meeting. In 1936 sixteen pounds eleven shillings and three pence [$33.13] was raised. But the success of the fund-raising actually created a small dilemma for AIM—was the money gained from an illicit activity, gambling? Did the AIM realise that it was associated with horse racing? In a lengthy report about the problems being faced by Wimmera Home, Chris Goy reported that in addition to other difficulties:

...some misguided AIM friend from down South wrote to Mr. Geo. Martin and told him that it was contrary to the laws of the Presbyterian Church for any money to be received as a donation that was raised at the race meeting. Re the letter about the races I told them to put it in the Waste Paper Basket. It was evidently written by someone who had no knowledge whatsoever of the type of function the annual sports took. The writer must have thought that the Wimmera Sports (sic) meeting was on all fours with Randwick or Harold Park.

When the interviewer asked Mr and Mrs Johnston how the white men working on Alexandria entertained themselves he was told:

CJ: Well, we had a race meeting every twelve months at the Ranken.

INT: Where's that?

CJ: The Ranken. That was on the stock route. There used to be a police station there.

INT: Was that in Alexandria?

CJ: Yes. Closed down now. And the police have been transferred to Avon Downs that's near Camooweal. And they'd have about three weeks, and that would be their holiday. They'd have horses. They'd race some station horse, whatever it was. But that was their holiday. They never looked for anything else.

EJ: At Christmas time we had . .

CJ: They'd have a few pence and spend it all . .

EJ: They'd come into the station at Christmas time. They never had Christmas time til (sic) I went there. And I decided then that you'd have Christmas.

After World War II the annual race meeting for the Victoria River district was held at Negri just over the Western Australian border in the East Kimberleys. Organisation of the meeting involved station people in lengthy preparation. Two months before the races men would be sent down to build big bough sheds. A grader went in to grade a proper road on the site so that traffic could be controlled and everybody, including children, could be safe. Leonie Wilmington described the post-war meetings:

INT: Well how did most people get to them, you know, how much motor transport was there by that time?

LW: Oh, everybody had transport.

INT: And - oh, I've sort of heard that, your know, they brought everybody in and - camp Aboriginals and everyone.

LW: Oh, everybody - yes, the whole station went. And it was funny, you never shut a door on a station, and you'd come back and there'd be ‘Called in, had a shower and a feed-see ya at the races’, sort of think, you know, but you never locked anything up in Western Australia. Oh
we used to have beaut camps, they all had names, ‘Knob Hill’, and oh, all different names, and they’d drop in.

INT: (Laughter) Well, how long did the races go for?

LW: Well, they raced on Friday, they had a sports-rope and rodeo and everything Saturday, Sunday it was sort of a-anything went, we’d be packing up, but we’d have one heck of a party, before we left.

INT: Going back to your races, what sort of races did they have? I believe there were all sort of-

LW: Well, in the beginning they were all grass fed-you weren't allowed to feed your horses, and they were all station horses, there were no imported breeds, or anything, they were just station horses, but the loveliest race of all was the race with all the boys, the native boys. You talk about ride to win, I'd put one of them on a Melbourne cup winner any day.32

It may not have been obvious to the whites who attended the meetings, but Aborigines from the Victoria River and East Kimberleys used the race meetings to achieve a number of important tasks. They discussed aspects of traditional law; they traded song and dance cycles; they arranged marriages; they discussed conditions on the pastoral properties and took counsel among themselves about appropriate action. A man, a Janama 'skin', who was involved in the strike on Wave Hill in 1966, in giving the story of the strike to Patrick McConvell used the annual trip to Negri as a time marker in his story.

"21.- Then (we said) We'll go west to the races and see if they give us big money when we get back". We went west for the races, and came back.
"23 We watched the White man: "where is it, where is it, where is it?", but there was nothing.
"24 Next year we started camp again. (We said) "no lies, everybody on all the camps, we must all leave them right now this time all together".
"25 We must go away down to the river carrying all the children and whatever else under our arms.
"26 West to the races (again), we had the races in the west.
"27 When we get back we'll leave them straight away (we said).

Women's Leisure Activities

This paper has concentrated mainly on gatherings and big social events. The role of white women in these events is clear: they organised and prepared the food and the light entertainment. Parties were work-often hard work. So what did they do when they wanted to loosen the social restraints and provide for their own emotional satisfaction? If Mrs Johnston's reminiscences are any guide it seems that one thing women liked to do was to get away from the routine of station life. Maybe even get away on their own for a while. Ruby Roney felt that way as a young woman at Oenpelli:

About two o'clock every afternoon, after I'd cleared away and washed up after the midday meal and set the afternoon tea tray ready for uncle and auntie, I went riding from two o'clock till five. I had a great time. I had plenty of nice horses to ride and I used to roam about...It's lovely country down Oenpelli, beautiful country, lovely open plains and even some times I rode up to the ports and always enjoyed my get away from nagging and fault finding for a while.34

It seems that most of the nursing sisters on VRD were accomplished horsewomen too. Sister Stewart had riding trousers made by a Chinese tailor in Darwin in 1935 when she passed through on her way to take up work at Wimmera Home. Her colleague Sister Langham rode
the thirty miles [48 km] to Humbert River to attend a sick lubra at Christmas time 1936. The journey took three days because of the rough country and creeks flooding with monsoonal rains.  

But the most lyrical accounts were made by Joyce Falconbridge in the diary she kept between May 1937 and May 1938. She wrote:

_Have been out riding nearly every day and its (sic) glorious. My mount, Brown Chief is a beautiful animal. About a fortnight ago, we set off early and went to Gordon Creek, was a lovely ride, and we came home in the moonlight. Had a few breathless moments at some of the crossings and finally got home at 1 am._  

And on 30th April in an entry which records the news of her engagement to drover Charles Fuller and of Dorothy Allen's to Noel Hall, another drover, Joyce wrote:

_Have had some lovely rides on dear old Brown Chief, out nearly every day. My ride on Daly I will never forget, neither will Noel or Dorothy I'm afraid. Chas came with us while he was here, and we had one lovely picnic, the four of us to Gordon Creek the Sunday before the boys left._

**Conclusions**

Let us firstly note that the people of the pastoral industry, i.e. the non-Aborigines who came to the Northern Territory to raise cattle, entertained themselves in much the same way as their urban compatriots. At least that is what they set out to do.

While people 'down south' listened to the phonogram, played bridge, sat around the radio, had picnics and gave dinner parties, the people on cattle stations did likewise. Cattle people visited neighbours and friends. Later when projectors were available they watched movies on Saturday nights. Visitors were taken on a tour of the district. On Sundays little girls and boys were dressed up by their parents and taken on an outing.

So there would seem, on the surface of things, to be no real difference between the cattle station and urban Darwin or Sydney or Adelaide. Activities on stations were not unique, did not discreetly belong to that world. The context is however very different. The physical and psychological settings are not really alike at all.

The people on stations acted, however, as if they could replicate in their Northern Territory environment what they knew, or remembered, of drawing rooms, lounge rooms and front verandahs down south. When the supplies of food were low, women substituted, or sent a blackfellow 30 miles [48 km] away to borrow as Sister Langham did in 1936 when Wimmera Home ran out of eggs during the pre-Christmas bake up! Dainty food was required for social evenings-sandwiches, gemscones, sponge cake, pikelets.

Elaborate food was provided for dinner parties. Non-alcoholic home brew was an essential element in the Christmas Eve conviviality. One's best clothes were worn, and if during the hot humid evening a good silk dress became drenched with perspiration then one simply went and changed into a fresh one.

The question is then: why, in the face of these odds, persist? White women might have told us that they were helping to civilise the bush on the one hand and to maintain standards on the other. White men, whose world everyone said it was, have told us how much they appreciated the refinements and care white women brought to the harsh brutal life of the bush.
Was it more involved than that? It is possible perhaps that the forms of recreation and leisure activities were chosen precisely as a means of relieving not the routinisation of hard work but the stress of living in a hostile physical environment. So that the way in which people lived inside the perimeter of the station house yard was in deliberate contradistinction to the life outside the fence.

There is more. Some people were also availing themselves of an opportunity to act differently to the ways they had in the urban south. For some the Saturday evening tennis parties and Christmas Day luncheons at the Big House were a chance to see, and engage in, the ways in which the wealthy and socially powerful conducted their domestic arrangements. One of the nursing sisters at Wimmera Home even once allowed herself to comment, albeit possibly ironically, on the servant problem in the north! People whose lives in the south might have been bounded by the hearth and church socials become participants in a world where the person seated next to them at dinner might be a Cabinet Minister or a concert pianist.

In the end the two most compelling images are the contrasting ones. On the one hand the small girl one Sunday afternoon in a starched white dress and pinafore having a ribbon pinned into her hair by her mother before she sets out with her brothers and their parents on a walk to the No. 1 bore or a drive to an outstation. And on the other? A young woman mounted on a favourite horse riding free in the beautiful open country of the north, turning homeward in the early evening to come home to the station in full moonlight. The constraints of civilisation broken by the freedom offered by the environment.
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34. Ruby Roney, op cit p21
35. NLA MS 5574, various correspondence
36. Falconbridge, J, Personal diary, 31 March 1938
37. ibid 30 April 1938