

Working for a living again.

Wednesday 27<sup>th</sup> September 2006

It's journal time again folks and I have lots of catching up to do. Not much has happened with the journal for the last 10 weeks. Work as a truck driver has interfered with both the journal and my photography but I am now happily retired again and out in the bush so there are few distractions and lots of peace and quiet.

This part of the journal will tell you all about my experiences driving a concrete truck and living and working in the Pilbara and around Karratha and Roebourne.

To start with I will tell you that right now I am in the Millstream-Chichester national park and I intend to spend a couple of days here just catching up and trying to erase the memories of working for a living. I suppose the best way to do that is tell the story and get it out of my system.

I left of the last part of the journal telling you that I had a job driving a concrete truck for Hanson in Karratha. Hanson is the old Pioneer Concrete and I know that cousin Dennis will know all about that.



The experience was good but not great and I now have a new skill that is portable and that means that if I need a job I can front up to any concrete plant in the country and most likely get a job. I know that is the case here in the North West because they are crying out for people to do all kinds of work. If you have 2 arms and 2 legs they will just about drag you off the street and offer you work. Since I started work I have been offered 2 other jobs, one driving busses and the other driving dump trucks in a copper mine.

Before I get into the more interesting aspects of the work I will describe my living arrangements. Accommodation is a real problem in this area because the growth is outstripping the ability of the infrastructure to cope. I know in the concrete industry we were pouring at least one house slab a day, every day including Saturday. And that doesn't allow for the other company in town. The waiting list for permanent sites in the caravan parks was impossible so initially I moved back out to Cleaverville and set up a semi-permanent spot there.



This arrangement was all right but it had its downside. There are no facilities here and that includes water. I had to fill my water tanks in town and make sure I put the water bag out each morning so I would have a hot shower when I got back each evening. That was OK till I had to work back till after dark so I had a couple of not so warm showers. I had to do all of my washing in a bucket and that was usually Sunday morning, my only day off. The other downside was the reason I moved back to semi-civilisation. I had seen a number of signs of Joe Blakes in the vicinity and that was fine until one Sunday morning I almost stood on one, a brown, right under my clothes line. I figured that was too close and I was living in his territory so I moved out a couple of days later. I checked out the caravan park at Roebourne, about 40 km from Karratha and about the same distance as Cleaverville for travel to work. The cost was acceptable and that is another aspect of life up here. Everything costs so much because of the remote nature of the area and the fact that everyone is earning so much. I feel sorry for the likes of police and teachers as their incomes are on a much lower level than general labourers. They do get some allowances and somewhere to live but it still doesn't make up for money in the hand.



My site in the caravan park at Roebourne and this photo was taken on the only cloudy day in 10 weeks. We had storms that night and everyone was overjoyed that we had about 5mm of rain. This is the dry season up here and the wet starts around November or December and I don't want to be here then. Last wet season they had 7 cyclones in the region and that is a bad season. The prediction is that it will be the same this year and not all of the damage has been repaired from last year.

Going back to the job and some of the stories I have to tell. I worked long hours, generally never less than 10 hours a day and the starts were all before sunrise. I got to see a lot of places that are not on the tourist routes and I had to do inductions to go onto some industrial sites, like the Dampier Salt site, and iron ore loading facilities. I have no photos of these places because the environment would not have been good for the camera and I was usually too busy to take photos anyway.

I did a couple of interesting jobs that tested the ability of concrete not to go solid in the bowl of the truck. Dennis, you may appreciate this one. I had to get to work really early one morning, about 4:45am and load up 4 cubic metres about, 8 tonnes. I then proceeded to drive it 320km (200 miles) down the North-West Coastal Highway to a gas pipeline job. My instructions were to go 53km south of the Nanutarra Roadhouse and look for someone parked on the side of the road. This person would then lead me into the bush on a dirt track to the site. This trip took 3hours and 30 mins and the concrete was on its last legs. I managed to get it unloaded but it was going off within 10 mins of hitting the ground. The concreters were screeding and finishing while I was still unloading. The normal way of doing a job like this would be to take a dry mix and add water on site but there was no water anywhere within a 100 km of the site.

Another interesting job was to bring 5 cubic metres up here to the Millstream homestead. The trip was only about 190 km (120 miles) but it was all dirt, using the Pilbara Iron rail access road. I had to go and watch a video and get a permit to use the road. I have some photos of this job because I used the same road and permit to travel up to camp here.



I drove my truck up this hill and at the time it weighed about 23 tonnes and it became steep enough that I thought I might lose some concrete out the back. I solved that problem by speeding up the rotation of the bowl in mix mode but that then deprives the engine of a lot of power needed to climb the hill.



The road follows the rail very closely but they didn't do anything about the grades or the alignment for the road.



My load of concrete being built on. The structure is to be a camp kitchen in the camping area at the homestead.

The last story about work was a pleasant diversion. I was asked if I would go up to Port Hedland for 3 days and work from the plant there. Port Hedland is about 250 km (150 miles) north of Karratha. I drove my home up there and camped on site at the batching plant. I already knew one of the drivers from up there and Don and I got on well.



Don is the third triplet and I will tell that story at the end.



The interesting thing for me with this sojourn was doing a job that required some special skills. Again, Dennis you should recognise what I was up against. I arrived in Port Hedland on the Wednesday afternoon after doing a couple of loads in the morning at Karratha. Thursday morning I discovered that I would be doing kerb mix to a kerbing machine all day. I had the use of a truck with a 6 speed automatic gearbox and that made the job a little easier but still no walk in the park. Kerb mix is very dry to enable the machine to lay it and have it retain the shape of the mould as the machine moves on. What this means is that you can't load the truck to its full capacity or it will fall over on its side on the first right hand turn that you make. That is the first of many problems that this job entails.



This is the last truck that did kerb mix and my mate Don was driving. That is why I was there, because Don wouldn't do it. The rest of the exercise is all about co-ordination. You have to match the truck speed to the speed of the machine, drive the same line as the machine while you are only centimetres from its front corner and control the discharge of the concrete to the machine so it doesn't go empty or overfill. I was driving forward but watching in the mirror for the signals from the machine operator. I was the only truck on that job and did 7 loads to the machine between 7:00am and 5:00pm with no breaks at all. Now that I have bored everyone with the work thing I have one photo that may interest people. I want a reply from everyone and I want you to tell me what the bulldozer is pushing on this heap.



The story about the triplets now and I can bring this part of the journal to an end. When I first started with Hanson I travelled as a passenger with some of the other drivers and I was out one day with Geoff



Now Geoff has a beard something like mine and one of the other drivers passed us on the road. He got on the radio and made some crack about the twins and Geoff came back as quick as a flash and said even our mother had trouble telling us apart. Well when Don came down to work at Karratha for a few days we became the triplets. The funny coincidence is that we are all the same age. Don is a couple of months older than me and I am a couple of months older than Geoff. I made one other very good friend at Hanson even if it was only for a couple of weeks.



Richard is a true gentleman and a very intelligent man and he and I had some very interesting conversations. I would have liked to spend more time with him because he



had some terrific stories to tell. That is Don and Richard doing some repair jobs around the plant during a quiet time. Just going back to Don very quickly, he has been a teacher, a beekeeper, an astronomer, and many other things so we had some really good conversations as well.

I did send some people a photo of the road trains that operate up here and I received some different comments about them. First the photo and then I will try to describe what it is like riding in one. Take note that I said riding and not driving.



This truck is what is known as a three and a half. This is about as big as they get at this stage, but who knows what will come in the future up here. The all up laden weight of this truck is about 120 tonnes and there are 82 wheels. The 600 hp prime mover will pull this unit along the highway at 100 kph (60 mph) with no problems at all. I got a ride in one of these trucks a few weeks ago when I was asked to get up to Whim Creek to pick up a concrete truck that had been left there for us. Whim Creek is about half way to Port Hedland and is about 130 km (80 miles) north of Karratha. There is nothing at Whim Creek but a pub and a copper mine so it wasn't going to be an afternoon out. The ride up with Billy was not much different to driving my own little truck because once he got the truck rolling there was nothing special or different about the ride. It was a bit strange to look in the mirror and see all of these trailers following behind, but that was it. Joe, you talked about the potential for disaster with trucks this size but the opposite seems to be the case. I have no knowledge of any disasters with these rigs but I know of three fatal accidents involving kids and fast cars while I have been here and the other group that is a problem are the tourists towing caravans and trailers. The driving conditions are like nothing you would experience in the USA and out on the highway there is a fellowship and courtesy that even the eastern states in OZ don't have. Everyone still waves as you pass and if you pull over on the side of the road and not at a rest area then 60% to 80% of the cars going either way will stop or slow down to make sure you are OK. The road conditions are not fabulous but the roads are flat and straight with pavement that is in reasonable condition so there is really no reason not to have trucks this size or bigger.

The other thing that makes these trucks viable is the fact that there are no traffic lights up here. The last light that I had to stop for was about 3 months ago as I was leaving Perth after my flight back from the USA.  
Time to call a halt to this part of the journal and move on to new horizons.