



## LARRY WELLS AND THE LOST TRIBE

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1



## LARRY WELLS AND THE LOST TRIBE

### INTRODUCTION

**In 1891 Sir Thomas Elder, a wealthy South Australian pastoralist, financed a scientific expedition to explore the Great Victoria Desert. The trip was convened under the auspices of the Royal Geographical Society and carried out many other geological and botanical duties.**

**This aim of this expedition was to confirm or otherwise the suitability of this region for pastoral activities.**

**This huge tract of land was left unexplored between the expeditions of Forrest, (1873-4), to the north and Giles (1875), to the south.**

2

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**THE HUGE EXPANSE OF GREAT VICTORIA DESERT THE 1891-2 ELDER EXPEDITION EXAMINED**

Forrest - 1874  
Gosse - 1873  
Maurice - 1901  
Giles - 1870's

3

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**THE ELDER SCIENTIFIC EXPEDITION OF 1891. LARRY WELLS 2<sup>ND</sup> FROM LEFT**

4



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### THE FLYING TRAVERSES EAST & WEST MARKS

Expedition leader Lindsay took the main party from Beltana to the north-west across the Everard and Birksgate Ranges. From Ranges Lindsay sent his surveyor, Mr Wells, on two "flying traverses" to cut across the Great Victoria desert, then rejoin and report to the main expedition party.



70 YEARS WOULD PASS BEFORE THE COUNTRY WAS VISITED AGAIN BY WHITE PEOPLE

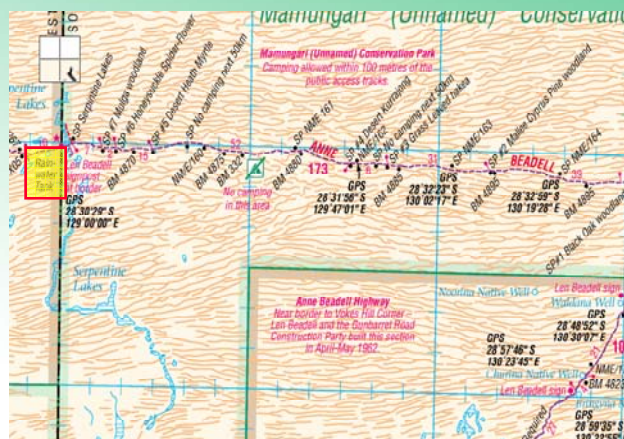
5




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### HEMA MAP EXTRACT OF A LEN BEADELL HIGHWAY (?)

Leonard (Len) Beadell, OAM, BEM, 1923-1995, was a surveyor, road builder and author, responsible for opening up the last remaining isolated desert areas. He built 6500kms of road in some 2.5 million square kilometres of central Australia from the 1940s to the 1960s. Len is sometimes called "the last true Australian explorer".




6




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### ISOLATION OF THE GREAT VICTORIA DESERT

**Len Beadell was given the job of opening up the north-west corner of South Australia for recovery of rockets launched from the Woomera Rocket Range. He was also required to enable access to the atomic bomb sites at Emu and Maralinga**




**7**



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### ISOLATION OF THE GREAT VICTORIA DESERT

**The first comprehensive topographic maps of the Great Victoria Desert were compiled from positional information given by astronomical information – see NMA/E/32 ( National Mapping Astronomical station). The only man made feature on this map, apart from the Anne Beadell Highway (1962)**



**8**



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**NATIONAL MAPPING LEVEL TRAVERSE FROM 1966**

The two-way levelling traverses were carried out in 1966 by contractors working for the National Mapping Department. This is one of most longest and remote stretches of levelling in the Australian Height Datum

<570 kilometres between junction points >

9

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**NATIONAL MAPPING TRIG TRAVERSES FROM 1965**

The trig traverses run in the 1965 era were excellently reconnoitred – line lengths of up to 50 kilometres were achieved. Thus triangulation chains in South and Western Australia were joined and adjusted.

<49 kilometres >

10



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SHORED WATER HOLE - GREAT VICTORIA DESERT  
THE INSCRIPTION "NATIONAL MAPPING" IS IN THE SHADOW



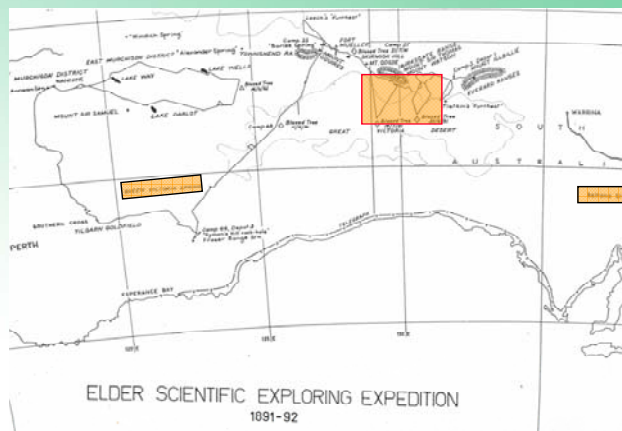
## LARRY WELLS AND THE LOST TRIBE


THE HUGE TASK FOR THE 1891 EXPEDITION

In 1981 Simon Coxon and Geoff Sandford went looking for one of two lonely trees blazed by L.A. (Larry) Wells

However they discovered evidence that lead them to believe tribal aboriginals still inhabited the area.

Widespread disbelief lead the authors to remain silent on the matter for years.






## LARRY WELLS AND THE LOST TRIBE

### THE SEARCH FOR THE BLAZED TREE


The search for the tree marked by explorer Larry Wells, “the most lonely marking of any explorer in Australia” was a temptation the authors could not resist. (Extract from Christopher Steele’s book)

At the southernmost point of this reconnaissance, Wells marked a desert gum as follows:  
 Located some 10 miles east of the boundary between South Australia and Western Australia at latitude 28° 22' 12", it is probably the most lonely marking of any explorer in Australia. Yet, strange to relate, near here Wells was surprised to see the distinct track of a bullock made in the three months since rain had fallen. The beast had obviously strayed some hundreds of miles from the nearest settlement in the south.



50

13



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### THE METHOD OF LOCATING THE BLAZED TREES

1. UTM coords of tree derived from computation of Wells’ traverse - these computations were
  - based on trig point coords (new) from which Wells commenced
  - Corrected in bearing for change in magnetic declination since 1891
  - Adjusted onto observed latitude and closing trig point coords (new)
2. Derived UTM coords were plotted on 1:250,000 topographic map
3. Aerial photography and topographic map were compared and points plotted on enlarged aerial photos
4. Authors navigated to derived locations on aerial photos and struck camp
5. Latitude observation was repeated and correct latitude pegged
6. Stakes were laid out due east and west of correct latitude peg
7. Likely trees matching description were checked and marked on photographs

14

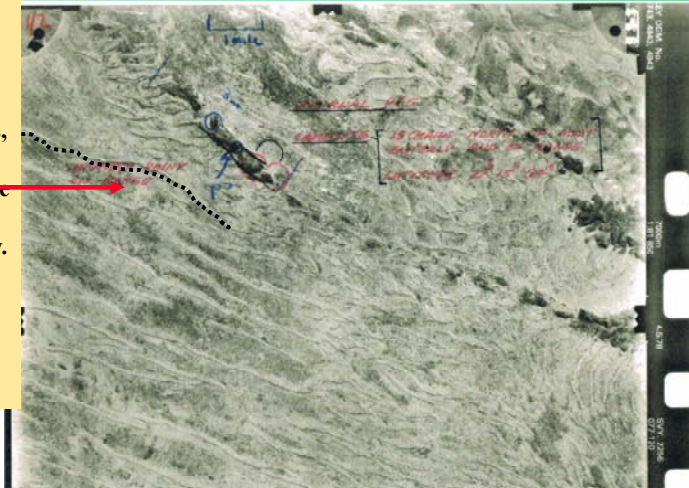


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### AERIAL PHOTO OF GREAT VICTORIA DESERT

The distance between crests of sand-hills were accurately recorded, in chains, in Wells' diary. These sand-hills are visible in current aerial photography. Thus the authors were able to navigate to campsites on the aerial photographs



15

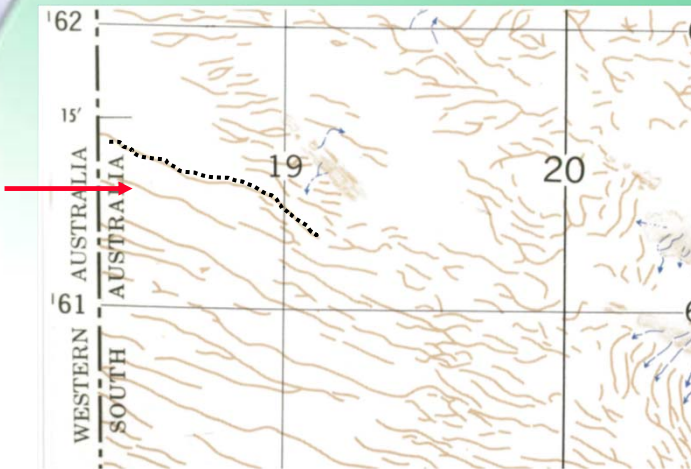


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## LARRY WELLS AND THE LOST TRIBE

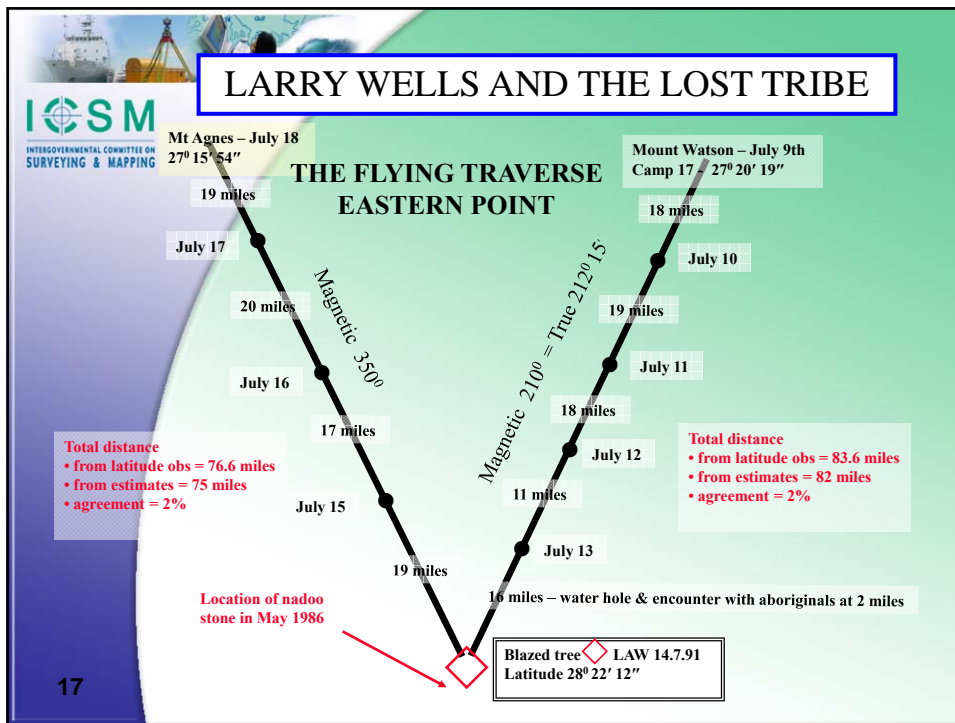
### EXTRACT FROM 1:250,000 SCALE TOPOGRAPHIC MAP

The sand-hills were also accurately plotted, via planimetric means only, in the early 1960's. This enabled the authors to derive coordinates for the camp sites



16





### LARRY WELLS AND THE LOST TRIBE

#### REPEATING WELLS' LATITUDE OBSERVATION

Time of transit of star 369, $\alpha$ Trianguli Australis	28° 15' 16"	C.A.S.T.		
Star	D	M	S	
361	28	22	29	
369	28	22	26	
379	28	22	45	
385	28	22	24	
423	28	22	30	
434	28	22	37	
459	28	22	7	
359	28	22	47	
Mean	28	22	33	
		S.D.	34	
	Mean	28	22	35
		S.D.	11	
	s.f. Wells	28	22	12
	Error in position			25"

An even number of north and south stars were observed

So I had some walking to do ~ 23 x 30 metres ~ 700 metres north

18

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### AN ABORIGINAL NADOO STONE

The picture shows an aboriginal nadoo stone, (seed grinding stone), similar to the broken one found by the author on May 8<sup>th</sup> 1981 at the location shown on the previous slide. That stone found by the author has been returned to the desert




19

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### A MOST LIKELY KURRAJONG TREE – EAST POINT



20




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### THE DESERT IS A PLACE OF ADVENTURE FOR CHILDREN

An eight year old Alice Sandford won seven Brownie Badges for her two weeks of camping in the desert.

Many rules were put in place to keep her safe but she turned out to be the hero – saving her lost father!




21



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### WELLS' JOURNAL EXTRACT

#### NEAR EASTERN POINT



*" July 14th.— Few night showers ran last night. Let camels go at 4:20 a.m. Breakfast. Made start at 7:30 a.m. on same course, passing over same class of country as yesterday. At three miles passed old wurlies on rise, and immediately afterwards came upon basin in sandhills, with a splendid rockhole at south side of sandhill. Open portion 4ft. in diameter, and extends under the sandstone rock for a great way. I pushed a stick under for 10ft. and could not find the other end. Watered all the camels, and as there was good feed here let them pick for an hour instead of staying for lunch. Aneroid here at 9 a.m., 28° 8' 25, ther. 56°; 1,100ft. above sea level. Calm, and for just clearing off. A few mulga and currant bushes near the rockhole. Left here at 9:50 a.m. At half a mile came upon a temporary camp of natives and saw their hunting implements there and a fire burning. They had evidently gone out hunting. At one mile surprised a young lubra, who ran away. I called to her, but she would not stay. At a mile and a half came upon another temporary camp, where we surprised an old lubra who was cooking opossum. She cried out and ran away, with a wooden dish upon her head, setting up a most pitiful wail which she kept up for some time. The other lubras answered her several times. We touched nothing in either camp, and kept on our bearing. At three miles passed a low flat 1,000ft. above sea level. At five miles a high point 1,275ft. above sea level. At six miles top of ridge, 1,250ft. above sea level. At twelve miles camped on southeast side of sandridge at 3 p.m., the camels being very tired and sulky. Travelled about sixteen miles to-day. Came from here for a great distance to the west and south-west, say thirty or forty miles; all apparently sandridges. High peaks at three miles*

22



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### EXPEDITION SUMMARY

**The observations made by Lawrence Wells were completely vindicated by later surveyors:**

- **Yes you can see for up to 50 kilometres from some sand-hills – this was proven by the later trig traverses**
- **His claim to have seen 20 miles to the south from the blazed tree was correct. This exactly covered the region to where Giles had explored – the purpose of his “flying” traverses**
- **The distances calculated from his camel paces were extremely accurate and enabled individual sand-hills to be identified**

23



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## LARRY WELLS AND THE LOST TRIBE

### EXPEDITION SUMMARY continued...

- **Wells’ treatment of, and respect for, the local aboriginals was exemplary and showed him to be a man of great integrity**
- **The artefact discovered by the authors had been found in the same area where Wells had encountered aboriginals in 1891**
- **The artefact was left by the descendants of these Western Desert people**
- **The last remaining tribal aboriginals treated “white-man” with the same caution shown by their ancestors**

24





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**LARRY  
 WELLS  
 AND THE  
 LOST  
 TRIBE**

**THE ARTICLE  
 FROM THE  
 ADELAIDE  
 ADVERTISER -  
 OCTOBER 14<sup>TH</sup>  
 1986.**

**THIS WAS SIX MONTHS  
 AFTER THE AUTHORS LEFT  
 THE AREA & 5 YEARS AFTER  
 THE FINDING OF THE  
 BROKEN NADOO STONE**

**Aborigines see  
 'white ghosts'**

25

**KALGOORLIE** — The seven Aborigines found in WA thought white people were ghosts existing only in the stories told by an old man.

The aeroplanes they saw in the desert sky made them realise that civilisation existed beyond the fringes of the Great Victoria Desert in the eastern corner of WA.

But they would not venture out of their tribal territory.

This remarkable situation has been revealed after a group of Wankatja Aborigines discovered relatives they thought were dead, wandering in sandhill country south of Blackstone, about 700 kilometres east of Kalgoorlie.

Seven people — four men (three brothers), two women and a little boy — have lived in the desert for 25 years. In that time, they have had no contact with the outside world.

Except for the eldest man, none had ever seen white people or modern civilisation.



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**LARRY WELLS AND THE LOST TRIBE**

**THE LAST TRIBE OF NOMADIC ABORIGINALS  
 OCTOBER 14<sup>TH</sup> 1986**

The seven nomadic aboriginals. Pictured with two distant relatives who were required to translate their tale into English



26




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### A PREVIOUSLY HABITABLE COUNTRY CAN NO LONGER SUPPORT HUMAN LIFE

A water hole near the South Australian & Western Australian, (see slide 6), border, previously known to only a few. The photo from May 1981 shows a depth of 1.2 metres. Until then this hole had never been dry.

In May 1986 the hole was completely dry – drained by wild camels. Since this date water drums, then a tank have been placed at the site



27



## LARRY WELLS AND THE LOST TRIBE

### EPILOGUE

- Wells lost both relatives and expedition members, and had close encounters with death himself
- Laurence Wells died after being struck by a train at the Blackwood railway station in 1938 – he was still actively involved in exploration at that time.
- The tribal aborigines found in 1986 could not acclimatise to “civilised society”. Those who did not die in the short years after nearly all drifted off into the desert and were not seen again.

28



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## LARRY WELLS AND THE LOST TRIBE

A COMMEMORATIVE PLAQUE TO L.A. WELLS  
NORTH TERRACE, ADELAIDE



29