

# LASSETER'S GOLD

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY EDWARD STOKES

**“What good a reef worth millions?  
I would give it all for a loaf of bread . . .  
I am paying the penalty with my life,  
may it be a lesson to others.”**

**S**O wrote Harold Lasseter in January 1931, an emaciated wreck dying in central Australia's Petermann Ranges. Only weeks before he recorded having rediscovered his legendary gold reef, but now - marooned without food after his camels had bolted - he faced death alone.

may drive me to  
shoot myself I think  
if the worst possible day  
with one speck of  
this country I should  
never have gone alone  
but I relied on Paul to  
follow me what good  
reef worth millions I  
would give it all for  
a loaf of bread and  
to think that only a week  
away in lots of trucks  
the blacks are not trusting  
me and they know I'm  
dying + will wait

*Above: Harsh terrain near Irving Creek where Lasseter died.  
Right: The torment of his last days was recorded in his diary.*



**F**LYING OVER Lasseter's route recently with his son Bob, I was awed by the implacable country Lasseter had crossed. One hundred kilometres north-west of Ayers Rock slender desert oaks cast harsh shadows on the bare earth and a silvery shimmer gleamed on the horizon.

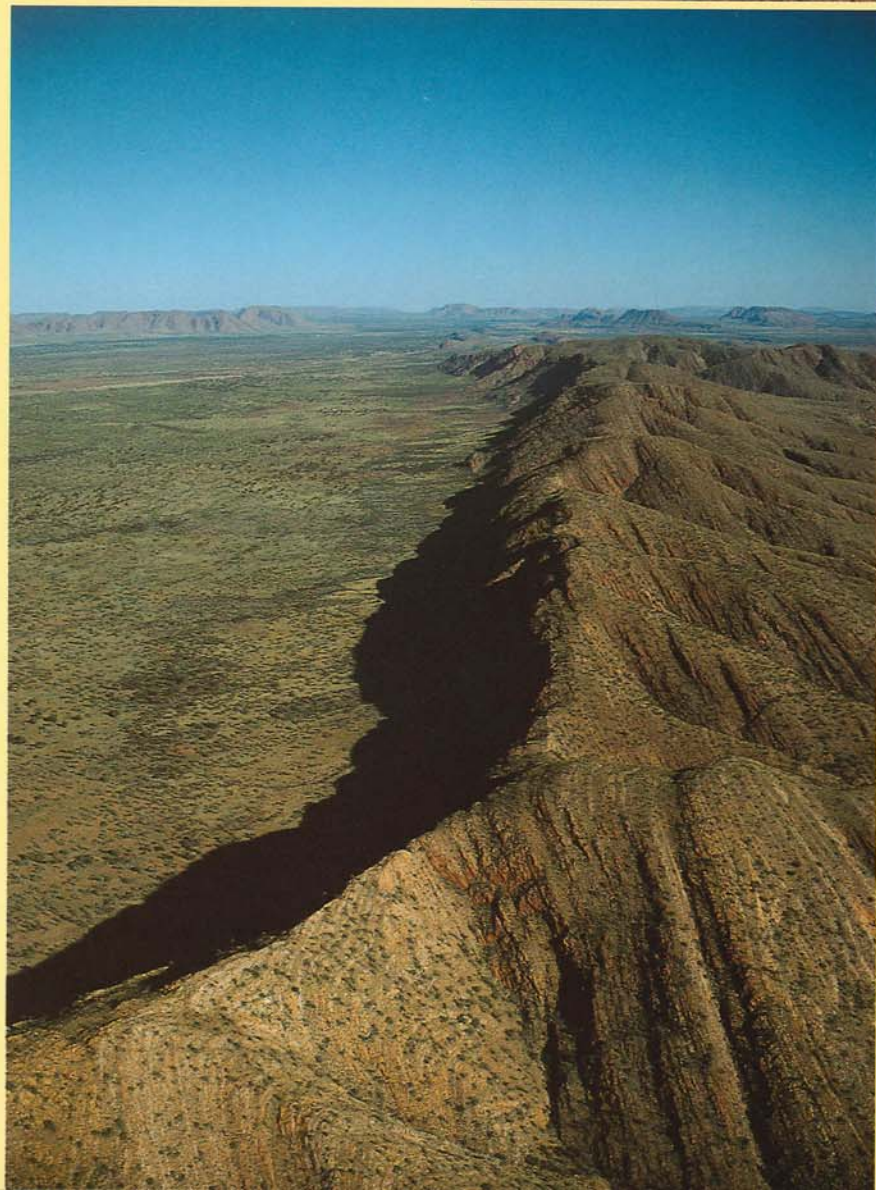
As we flew over Lake Amadeus' surreal expanses of white-grey salt, Bob Lasseter broke in on the intercom: "In a couple of minutes we'll be at the point where my father crossed with Paul Johns. It's incredible, I would have thought it virtually impossible to get across." Mesmerised by the stark beauty I nodded agreement, recalling Johns' vivid description of crossing the lake in September 1930:

**"The heavily laden camels, paralysed with fright, were slowly sinking into the quagmire. Frantically unslinging their loadings, straining at trappings and nose lines, shouting and cursing, we finally succeeded in freeing the animals from the mire."**

Three months after crossing Lake Amadeus Bob's father was dead. Lasseter's unrelenting quest for his gold reef, its value and his lonely death have become legendary, but with the legend has come controversy . . . Was there a reef at all, and did Lasseter find it? If he did, where?

The details of the Lasseter story have often been garbled and twisted to suit the legend. I set out to record the facts of Lasseter's quest and subsequent death, and through them to shed some new light on one of Australia's great mysteries. I examined the existing evidence as to the possible location of the reef and also explored the harsh grandeur of Lasseter's country, convinced that some of the answers lay in the land itself. Camped by the cave where Lasseter faced death, I began writing his story.

*Right: 'Bare earth' north-west of Ayers Rock. Below: Ranges to the west of Lake Amadeus - "sheer escarpments rising from the almost level plain".*



DICK SMITH

## Bright Hope in the Depression

**T**HE DESPAIR OF the Great Depression hung over Sydney in March of 1930. John Bailey, president of the powerful Australian Workers Union (AWU), had become inured to the hard luck stories of battling unionists, but the account he heard that month from a stocky and confidently persuasive man fired his imagination.

Harold Lasseter told Bailey how in 1897, aged 17, he had prospected for rubies near Alice Springs, and had

later discovered a rich, gold-bearing reef well to the west of 'the Alice'. He had become lost and almost died in the desert, but was found by an Afghan cameleer and taken to the camp of a West Australian surveyor named Harding.

Three years later Lasseter and Harding relocated the low reef; Harding registered their claim but their watches were faulty and the reef's calculated position was uncertain. Harding died shortly afterwards, and with gold mining booming at Kalgoorlie and Coolgardie, Lasseter was unable to find investors to exploit his reef. He had come to ask John Bailey: would

the AWU back him now?

The story was not unique. Popular adventure writers regularly evoked the romance of golden bonanzas beckoning beyond the centre's mirages (and often water), and during the 1920s there had been various aerial searches for a 'lost reef' in central Australia. However, Bailey also knew that the discovery of Kalgoorlie's gold in 1893 had helped lift Australia out of the grip of economic depression.

He assembled a group of union officials and mining experts to probe Lasseter's story and assess his credibility. Lasseter stuck to his original story, claiming that specimens taken



from the quartz-reef in 1900 had assayed at three ounces to the ton – a most promising grade. Although the reef's precise position in thick mulga scrub was uncertain, Lasseter was confident he could recognise his landmarks. After 30 years? Definitely.

A young lawyer, Fred Newnham, was one who sat through Lasseter's interrogation. Now 81, Fred recently recalled Lasseter's performance: "I could only go on the man. I heard him being cross-examined by two prospectors and fellows connected with the AWU, and I thought he shaped up very well. He seemed very convincing . . . you know, no delay about his answers."

In Canberra Bailey located Harding's claim, and probably spoke with friends and ministers in the Scullin Labor Government – in particular, with Arthur Blakeley, Minister for the Northern Territory, who would have recalled letters his office received from Lasseter in 1929 corroborating the story. Bailey hurried back to Sydney. There were doubts, there had to be doubts, but it was surely worth the risk.

The reef's estimated value was £60 million, or about \$2 billion on today's values. Bailey's confidants and their acquaintances were invited to float the Central Australian Gold Exploration Company to rediscover the reef. Financing was no difficult task: in the midst of the Depression £5000 was subscribed in 24 hours. Fred Newnham remembers: "It was really a bright star in the dull days of the Depression. The unemployed . . . you can imagine in that kind of atmosphere this bright star, the possibility of starting a gold rush."

## Expedition Planned

**T**HE EXPEDITION was planned in a frenzy following the company's formation. The decisions were mostly made by city men, and Lasseter was barely consulted, although he clearly favoured a small, mobile party and he had little faith in planes.

However, Errol Coote, a young journalist-pilot, convinced the company that a plane would be invaluable for support and reconnaissance, neatly

sidestepping the obvious difficulties of clearing bush airstrips and supplying fuel. Camels were still the most common carriers for expeditions cutting across central Australia, but when Thornycroft offered the use of a heavy six-wheeled truck the company promptly accepted.

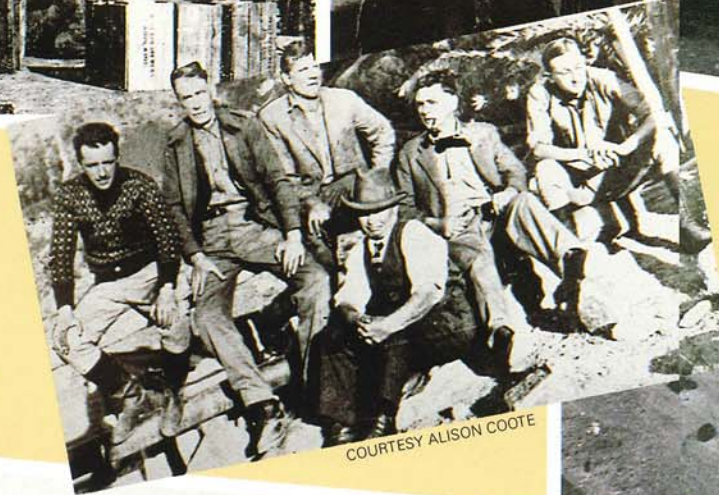
It was assumed that as Alice Springs was the closest railhead to the reef's

*Right: Lasseter pictured some years before the expedition.*



COURTESY ALISON COOTE

*Above: A camel team at Alice Springs prepares for the long haul to Ayers Rock. Right: The expedition party at Pantas Wells in the Macdonnell Ranges. Lasseter is in front. The others, left to right, are Coote, Sutherland, Colson, Blakeley and Taylor.*



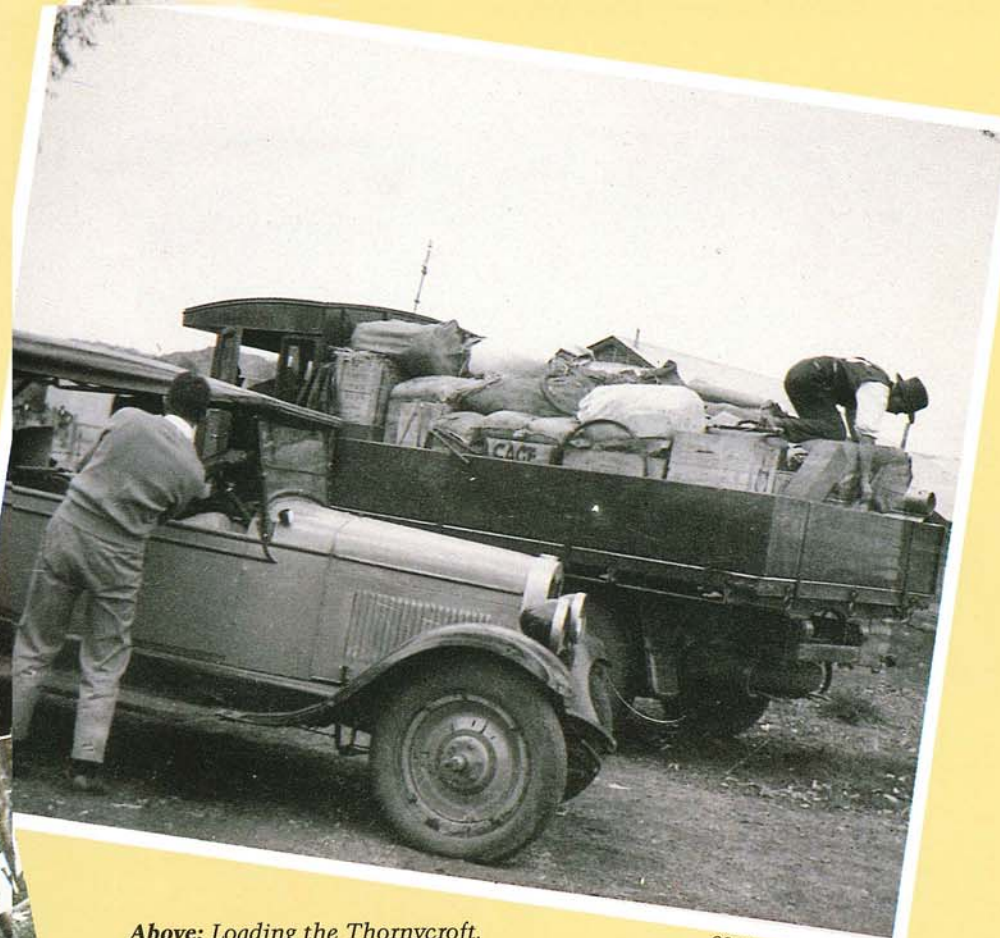
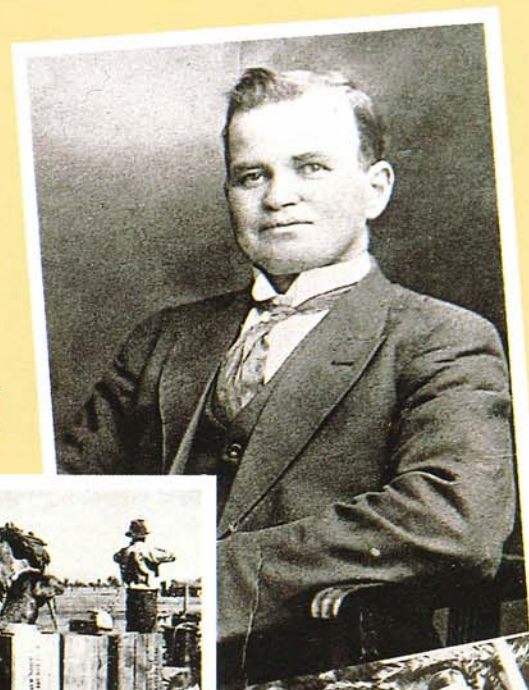
COURTESY ALISON COOTE



COURTESY ALISON COOTE

*Above: The Golden Quest after a mishap had damaged the propeller. Left: The plane did not survive a second accident, although Coote did.*

COURTESY ALISON COOTE



COURTESY ALISON COOTE

*Above: Loading the Thornycroft. Lasseter hard at work on the back of the truck. Below: The Golden Quest II at Ayers Rock.*



COURTESY ALISON COOTE

vicinity it was therefore the expedition's best starting point, but if the company had taken Lasseter more into its confidence it might have discovered one nagging doubt behind his bluff confidence: Lasseter was sure of picking up his landmarks travelling from the west, as he had with Harding, but was most anxious about recognising them from the east. He was also obliged to use maps which varied considerably from his knowledge of the country, and more sig-

about to search some of Australia's most remote country for Lasseter's inconspicuous reef only two had been outback before, and only Blakeley was a thorough bushman.

## The Expedition Leaves Alice

**"E**VERYONE WAS RIDING on a wave of enthusiasm," Blakeley recalled, "for here was something the country really needed . . . the patriotic spirit was simply grand." However, Alice Springs looked on sceptically as the expedition assembled. Despite its modern equipment there was an amateurish touch, and stories were circulating which questioned Lasseter's original discovery.

The expedition set off on 21 July 1930, the heavy Thornycroft leading a truck and car west past Alice Springs' towering escarpments. Blakeley led the convoy, skirting close enough to the Macdonnell's sinuous northern flank for water but far enough out for easy travelling. Lasseter seemed uneasy, and he was quickly nicknamed 'Possum' – a secretive one.

The first major difference between Lasseter and Blakeley surfaced at Haast Bluff, an imposing knob some 200 km west of Alice Springs. Lasseter wanted to go south-west, but Blakeley insisted on pushing directly west to Ilbilla. West of the Bluff a track had to be forced through thick mulga scrub. Coote recalled: "Our speed was so slow that even the flies could keep pace with us, and they attacked in millions. Everyone was fed up, tempers were raw."

An airstrip was cleared at Yai Yai Creek and Coote returned to Alice Springs to pilot the *Golden Quest*. He landed at Yai Yai on 2 August but, testing the runway's take-off potential, the plane touched a tree and almost crashed, postponing Lasseter's all-important reconnaissance flight.

West of Yai Yai Creek the rigours of rough travelling began to tell: the pestering flies and lack of water were constant irritations, while the sheer effort of trail-blazing through scrub was exhausting the men. Blakeley was beginning to doubt Lasseter's credibility, while Lasseter had little

nificantly, from the Northern Territory's official maps.

But the company's clearest failure occurred in its selection of men; a worse mismatching of characters could never have been imagined. Lasseter was designated as 'guide', under the direct orders of the leader, Fred Blakeley – by no small coincidence the brother of Arthur Blakeley, the Federal minister Bailey had consulted. Blakeley, then 48, was a travelled and experienced bushman, but he was a loner suspicious of 'schooled' people.

Errol Coote, 32, had purchased the expedition's Gipsy Moth, the *Golden Quest*; not surprisingly he was now appointed pilot and also deputy leader. Coote was an accomplished city journalist but an inexperienced pilot and his background was the antithesis of Blakeley's. Coote, Blakeley scathingly noted, "wore boots like girls. His rig-out was laughable." The two mainstays of this curious group were George Sutherland and Phil Taylor, the gold expert and engineer respectively; both were steady and adaptable, their wry humour rising above setbacks.

Thus the die was cast. Of the men



time for Blakeley's leadership. Furthermore, the radios never worked, effectively isolating the expedition.

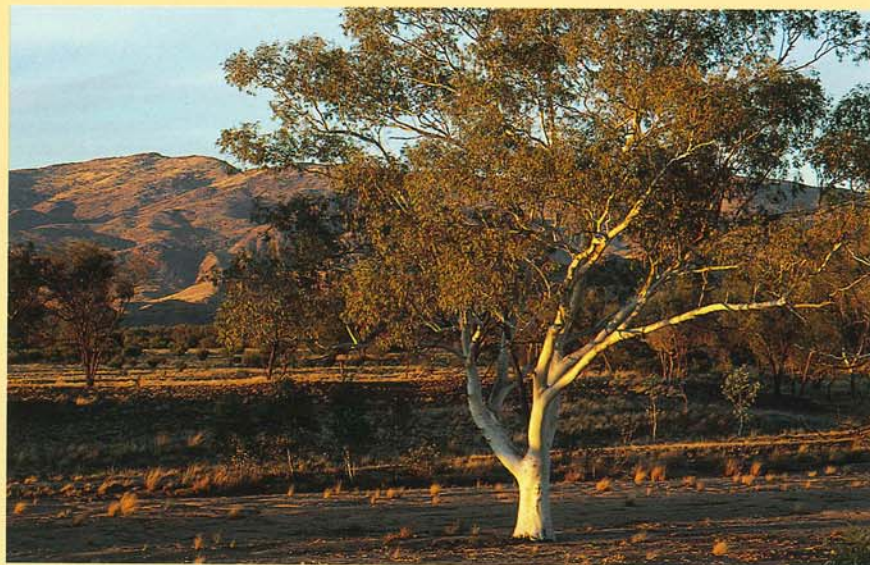
Ilbilla, in the Ehrenberg Range, proved a temporary sanctuary, but Lasseter was certain they were well north of the reef. Frustrated, he wrote to his Sydney lawyer: "I wonder how the Directors expect me to find the reef if the Leader will not follow my directions. I am now 70 miles (112 km) off my route."

Meanwhile Coote made ready to fly the *Golden Quest* to Ilbilla. Hurling down the rough runway he had a premonition of disaster: "The air was hot and so was my temperature. I felt something was going to happen." It did. A wing-tip hit a tree, the plane stalled and then plummeted nose-first into the scrub. Coote just escaped with his life.

With the *Golden Quest* overdue, Blakeley drove frantically back to Yai Yai. The up-ended plane and a terse note explained all. The *Golden Quest* – the expedition's great hope – was a total wreck.

However there was still the increasingly battered Thornycroft, and in it Blakeley pressed west toward the Kintore Range, an imposing massif rising out of the sandy wastes near the West Australian border. There the mutual distrust and antipathy between Blakeley and Lasseter escalated dramatically. His sights, Lasseter claimed, showed they were 250 km north of the reef, but Blakeley accused Lasseter of incompetence with a sextant and of fabricating his positions.

Dispirited and directionless the party turned back on Ilbilla. In late August the *Golden Quest II*, a replacement plane, arrived and Lasseter finally flew a reconnaissance flight south-west toward Bloods Range and the Petermann Ranges. He became extremely agitated during the flight, but said little on returning, merely reiterating that the reef was well to the south. In Coote, however, Lasseter confided that he had picked up his landmarks. Squatting in the sand Lasseter drew a map for Coote: Lake Christopher was the radial point and the reef lay about 15 km east of a lakelet. Looking along the reef in a north-westerly direction, three peaked hills appeared some 60 km away. The country close to the reef was thickly



*Dashwood Creek, where the first airstrip was cleared.*

timbered with mulga. Blakeley, however, was kept in the dark about this.

Still doubtful, Blakeley took the Thornycroft south-west, but any hopes of finding the reef were soon dulled by endless red sandhills and the unremitting toil of getting the Thornycroft over them. In a week they covered less than 100 km. Enthusiasm for Lasseter's reef was rapidly waning, water was running short, and, brought up by some particularly difficult terrain, Blakeley turned back.

**Right:** Looking south-west towards Haast Bluff, where Lasseter wanted to go south, but Blakeley insisted on pushing directly west.

**Below:** Anthills and thick mulga scrub form barriers through which a track had to be cut west of the Bluff.



## Lasseter Takes to Camels

**L**ASSETER HAD no intention of returning, and at Ilbilla he agreed to continue the search with a young cameleer, Paul Johns. Johns, three years out from Germany, had arrived at the camp unexpectedly after wandering the outback for four months, dingo scalping.

Blakeley signed on Johns with his five-camel team for two months, unloaded a cache of stores and then left with the expedition for Alice Springs. Lasseter and Blakeley were

equally relieved at the parting.

Coote was incensed. "What was the idea of abandoning the man on whose knowledge the expedition has been formed?" he demanded. But Blakeley's attitude was crystal clear: the reef was fiction, and having deceived the company, Lasseter could look after himself.

Lasseter and Johns left Ilbilla for the Petermann Ranges about 14 September, but the continuing drought forced them to zigzag southwards via permanent waterholes that Johns knew. They were travelling fast and steadily compared to the Thornycroft, covering about 30 km a day and observing

the country more easily. About 10 days out of Ilbilla, Lasseter and Johns reached Lake Amadeus. "The five camels were thirsty and unruly," Johns recalled. "We had rationed our water to a gallon a day between the two of us when we camped on the shores of that still, white expanse."

The extended drought made a lake crossing possible, although risky. Tempted by cutting four days off their march to Mt Olga and water, the two decided to chance it. Halfway across the camels bogged and only the frantic efforts of both men saved them all from death.

It had been a narrow escape, and





when the pair reached Katajuta – Mt Olga's shaded waterholes – two days later, they were on the point of collapse. From there Lasseter and Johns trekked westward into the pristine beauty of the Petermann Ranges, dwarfed by sheer escarpments rising from the almost level plain. Pitjantjatjara people shadowed them closely as they travelled.

Lasseter and Johns were now in the general vicinity of a south-westerly track from Haast Bluff and roughly 200 km south of Kintore. They were certainly in the area Lasseter might have reached – and could definitely have seen – during the flight from Ilbilla. As well, they were surrounded by some of central Australia's most beautiful and distinctive landmarks, features Lasseter might well have recalled over half a lifetime.

Exactly what transpired between Lasseter and Johns in the western Petermanns is shrouded in mystery. However, short of supplies and with two camels dead from poison weed, the men certainly made a rapid return

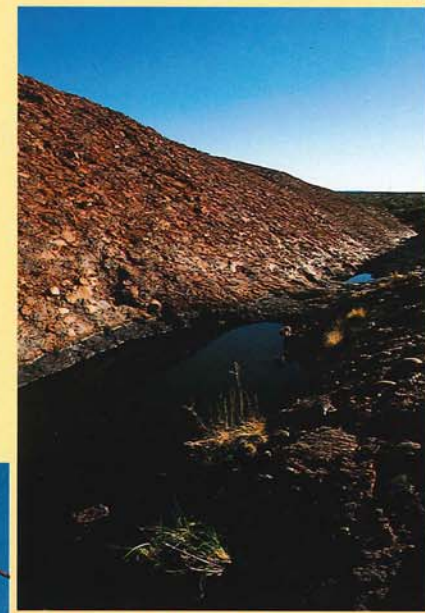
to Ilbilla in mid-October following a direct route made possible by recent rains.

They arrived at Ilbilla late that month, and Johns set off via Hermannsburg to fetch fresh camels and supplies from Alice Springs. He carried various letters from Lasseter, including one to the company outlining his planned route – to which he stuck close until his death. Lasseter clearly expected a search party to follow if he did not return.

## Lasseter Goes Alone

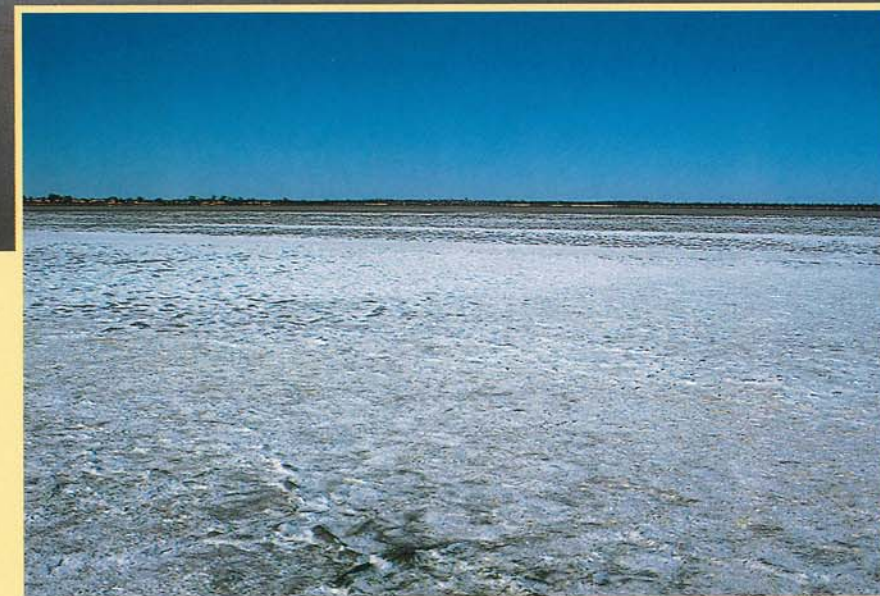
**L**ASSETER IMPLIED he would wait for Johns, but shortly afterwards he left Ilbilla, following the camel pads south to the Petermanns.

*Two views of Mount Olga, the oasis which Lasseter saw as his only chance of survival. He died 100 km short of its shady waterholes.*



Exactly what prompted Lasseter's hasty departure is unknown: was it simply his restless energy, or had he already been in the vicinity of the reef and decided that Johns was not to be trusted? The decision showed immense, if fatal, courage, and strongly suggests a real belief in his reef. Lasseter, aged 50, was heading alone with two camels into some of Australia's harshest country in the increasing heat of early November.

Meanwhile, the Central Australian



*Lake Amadeus. "Surreal expanses of white-grey salt", where Lasseter and Johns made a remarkable crossing in September 1930. Johns wrote: "The heavily laden camels, paralysed with fright, were slowly sinking into the quagmire". In the photo above, the Olgas are just visible on the horizon.*

Gold Exploration Company had ordered Coote and expedition engineer Phil Taylor to rendezvous at Ayers Rock in late October to search for Lasseter. However, Taylor's fuel-laden camels were delayed three weeks by October's rains, and Coote was almost dead when Taylor arrived on 7 November. Worse was to come: the same day that Coote flew to Alice Springs lest his long absence set off an air search, Taylor's camp caught fire, destroying his entire food supply. Lasseter's only support had disintegrated in the ashes of Taylor's camp.

By early December Lasseter had reached Lake Christopher, a barren

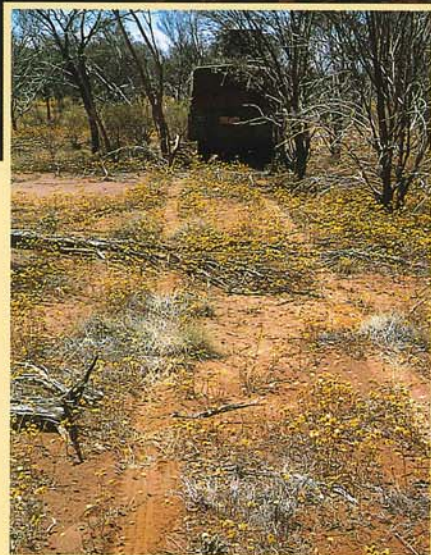
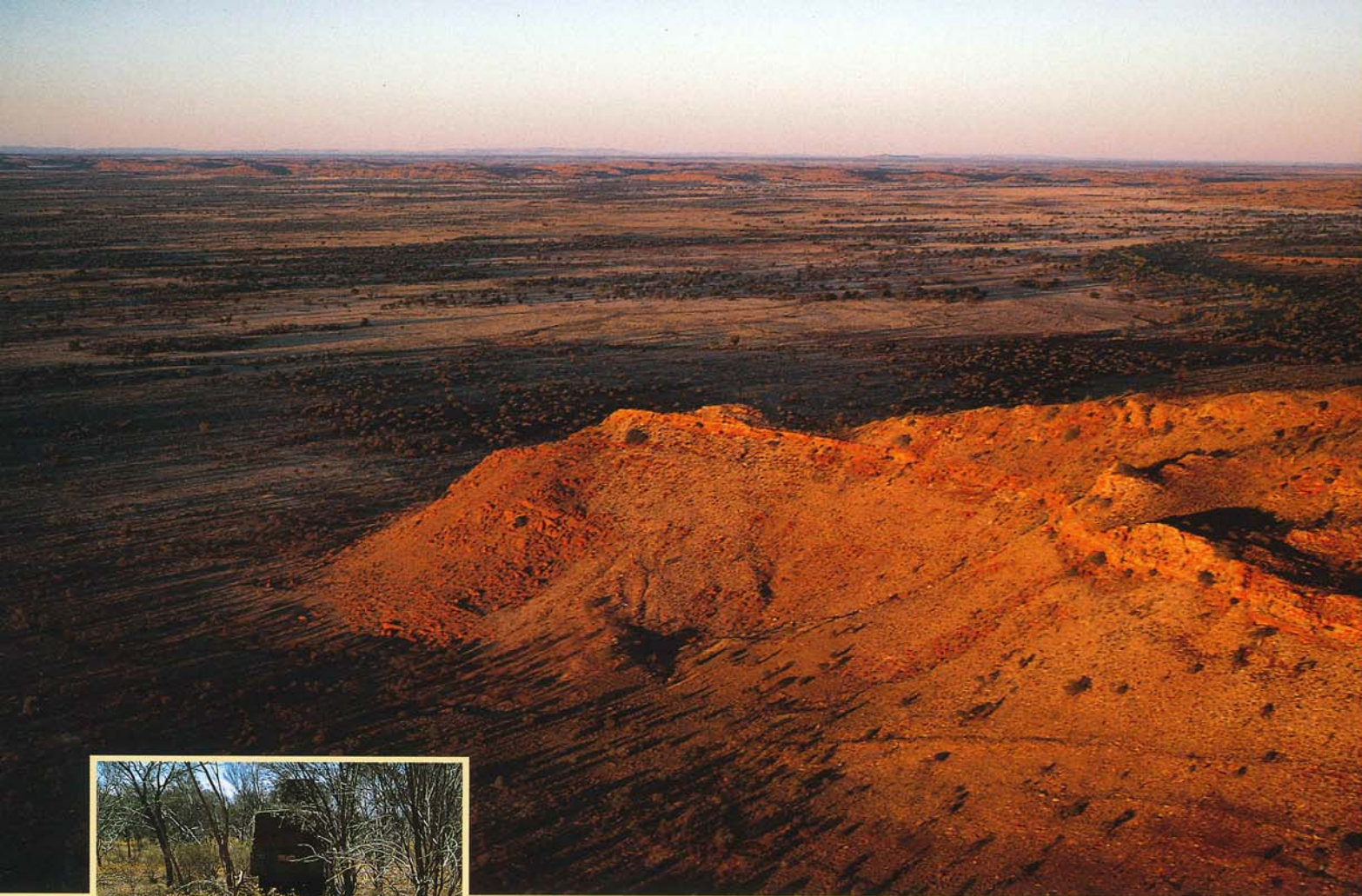
depression on the edge of the forbidding Gibson Desert. He had travelled through some 500 km of virtually waterless country, on constant guard against attack. White men rarely ventured in central Australia alone, and the lonely insecurity of Lasseter's last march is hard to comprehend. But Lasseter had left Ilbilla knowing the risks. His diary states:

**"I had to go right out to Lake Christopher which is 100 miles across the West Australian border, to get my bearings, and then I was able to go direct to the reef."**

Lasseter left Lake Christopher some time in early December and on 23 December he claimed to have relocated the gold-bearing reef. The only clue to the reef's location is that a few days later Lasseter's camels bolted some 50 km east of Docker River. The diary reads:

**"I've pegged the reef and photographed the datum post on the Quartz Blow. The post is sticking in a waterhole and the photo faces north. I made the run in five days but the blacks have a sacred place nearby and will pull up the peg for sure."**





BOB LASSETER

**Above:** Lasseter struggled 50 km through these broken hills before he died. The reef pictured is quartz, not gold.

**Left:** Bob Lasseter traces a four-wheel-drive route through dense scrub not far from the quartz reef.

and sheltered in a nearby cave which any party following his tracks west would pass. Trudging through the December heat without food to Ilbilla was unthinkable: it was far safer to stay put and hope for relief.

Lasseter waited in vain. The *Golden Quest II* was missing again, and from 2 January 1931 three Air Force planes led a 10-day, land-air search for the missing plane. Their mission was the only organisational triumph in the sorry saga, but, almost unbelievably, when the survivors were located the company made no request for the planes to search for Lasseter, whose last letter had clearly indicated he expected support and who was now well overdue. There were, it appeared, two scales of concern.

Time was running out at the cave. Lasseter was already weakened by

dysentery, slowly starving and the onset of sandy blight made it virtually impossible for him to fend for himself. Aborigines camped nearby gave him some food but they had little to spare. Episodes from the last six months must have drifted endlessly through his mind, blurring past and present as he waited . . . listening, hoping, regretting:

**“My God why does not help come? I think it the worst possible death with one experience of this country I should never have gone alone but I relied on Paul to follow me in 4 to 6 weeks at the outside . . . Blakeley assured me relief would be sent if I had not returned by November . . . to die a lonely horrible death is bad, but not to know why is even worse.”**

Lasseter weakened through January's fierce heat, and when it became obvious the food he promised was not coming the Aborigines withdrew

their help – except for one family who supported him to the end. But bush tucker was not enough:

**“I’m an awful sight and the flies are maddening and ants something Hell cannot improve on . . . I want relief and have saved one cartridge but will stick it out as long as possible.”**

A weaker man might have cut short the agony, but not Lasseter. Late in January he made a final bid for life, setting out with his Aboriginal helpers for Mt Olga and possible rescue. In two days he struggled 50 km through the broken hills, but the Olga's humps still lay 100 km below the horizon. The next day, still travelling, Lasseter collapsed and died by Irving Creek.

## A Legend in the Making

**I**N LATE JANUARY the company employed Bob Buck, a station manager, to search for Lasseter. Buck located the body in March. Later that year Buck led the company's second attempt to locate the reef, following Lasseter's camel pads west to Sladen Water. No gold was discovered, but riches of a kind were unearthed: Lasseter's diary was found buried in a cave.

Lasseter's story might have faded with time, but it was immortalised by author Ion Idriess. Idriess bought the diary from Lasseter's widow for £25, and within months had published *Lasseter's Last Ride*. By any measure the book was a phenomenal success; five editions appeared in as many months. The 30th edition appeared in 1947, and editions are still being printed today. Idriess had cashed in on a mysterious reef and a tragic death, but his book is a dubious mixture of fact and fiction.

Perhaps more than anything else it established the Lasseter legend – and riddled the real story with misinformation, exaggeration and innuendo. On the first page Idriess wrote: “Lasseter had found a gold reef; the yellow stuff was in it thick as plums in a pudding.”

Lasseter may have found a reef, but

he never claimed more for it than ‘specks’ of gold at three ounces to the ton. Idriess concluded by honouring the feats and deaths of other inland prospectors, adding prophetically, “others inevitably follow in the steps of the pathfinders.”

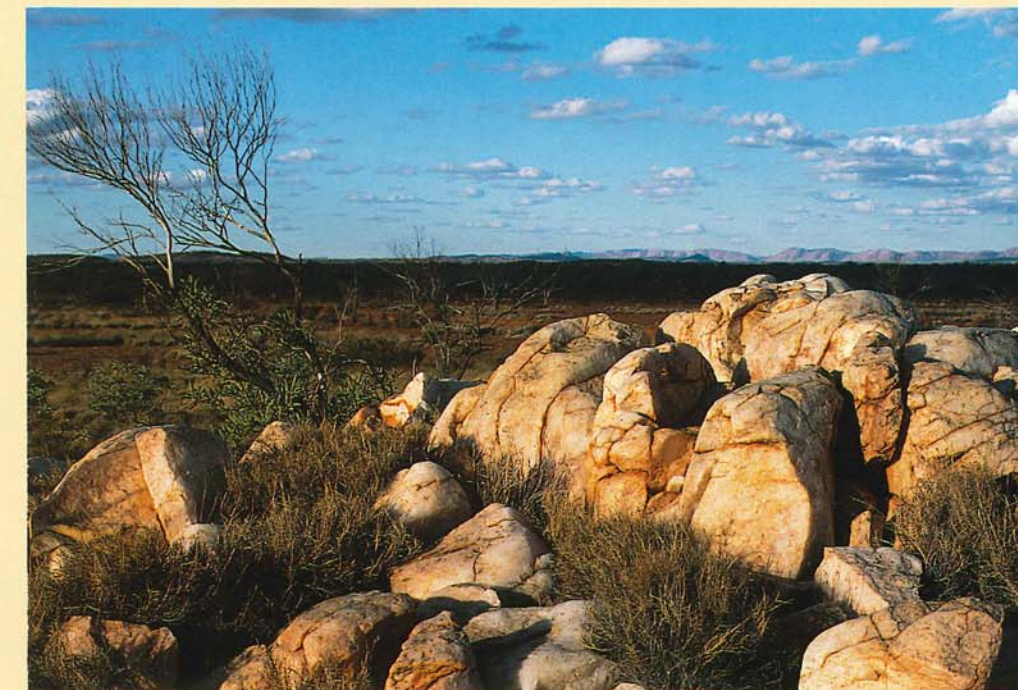
Expeditions seeking Lasseter's bonanza became commonplace in the 1930s, and doubtless most took the Idriess book as a guide – perhaps

only to curse it around lonely campfires. Lasseter's camel pads became a well-beaten track, as almost without exception the parties headed for the Pitjantjatjara's country around the Petermann and Rawlinson Ranges. Half a dozen major expeditions set out, and at least two were guided by ‘Lasseter's maps’ mysteriously found under the long-cold ashes of his fires.

No gold was discovered, but in 1932



**Above:** Not quite an industry, the Lasseter mystique has nevertheless lent itself to several commercial causes, from exploitative novels to bottles of brandy. Note the map on the bottle, setting out one interpretation of the reef's position. **Below:** Quartz reefs in open country.





the explorer Michael Terry stumbled on a tree blazed "Lasseter 2.12.30" at Lake Christopher and other signs of Lasseter – thus verifying Lasseter's diary entry that he reached the lake, a feat no member of the 1930 expedition believed him capable of.

The searching reached a violent climax in 1936 when H.A. Ellis, a government geologist, accompanied the Border Gold Reef Limited's second expedition. Ellis found nothing to authenticate the company's claims of gold, and was shot at for his trouble. His damning official report urged the need for extreme caution before investing in "any venture the basis of which is a fabulously rich reef in central Australia". The same year the *Bulletin* blasted the "cupidity of persons exploiting the Lasseter-reef business".

After World War II Lasseter stories persisted and even spread overseas. In 1957 an American filmmaker, guided by Pitjantjatjara men, located

Lasseter's grave and had his body unearthed and reburied at Alice Springs. No one had bothered to inquire whether Lasseter had left any family: the man had been lost in the legend.

## A Son's Journeys

**B**OB LASSETER was only five when his father left Sydney in 1930, and he grew up in the often disquieting shadow of rumour and controversy. Bob, Dick Smith and I rendezvoused near Alice Springs recently, and during a week following Lasseter's tracks Bob told me of his own quest: "Articles would come out in the papers saying Lasseter was a hoaxer, Lasseter was a fraud – he'd got away to America, different things like that. I'd more or less put my head in the sand and not see them."

However, in the 1950s Bob began looking into the stories and found

there appeared to be more truth in Lasseter's story than the rumours suggested. He became convinced that an understanding of his father's fate was impossible without exploring central Australia himself, but it was not until 1966 that he could finance his first expedition. Since then, Bob Lasseter has made 12 sorties to the Ibilla-Petermanns, each one a quiet contribution to vindicating his father's name.

In stark contrast to the original expedition there has been no fanfare and little publicity. "There'd already been enough hullabaloo with all those bogus groups," Bob's wife Elsie explained. "Bob didn't want to be part of that; he just wanted to do his own quiet research financed by himself . . . under his own steam, incognito."

There were only wheel tracks west from Ayers Rock to the Petermanns on Bob's first trips, and conditions cross-country were even worse. "I can remember getting very badly bogged in

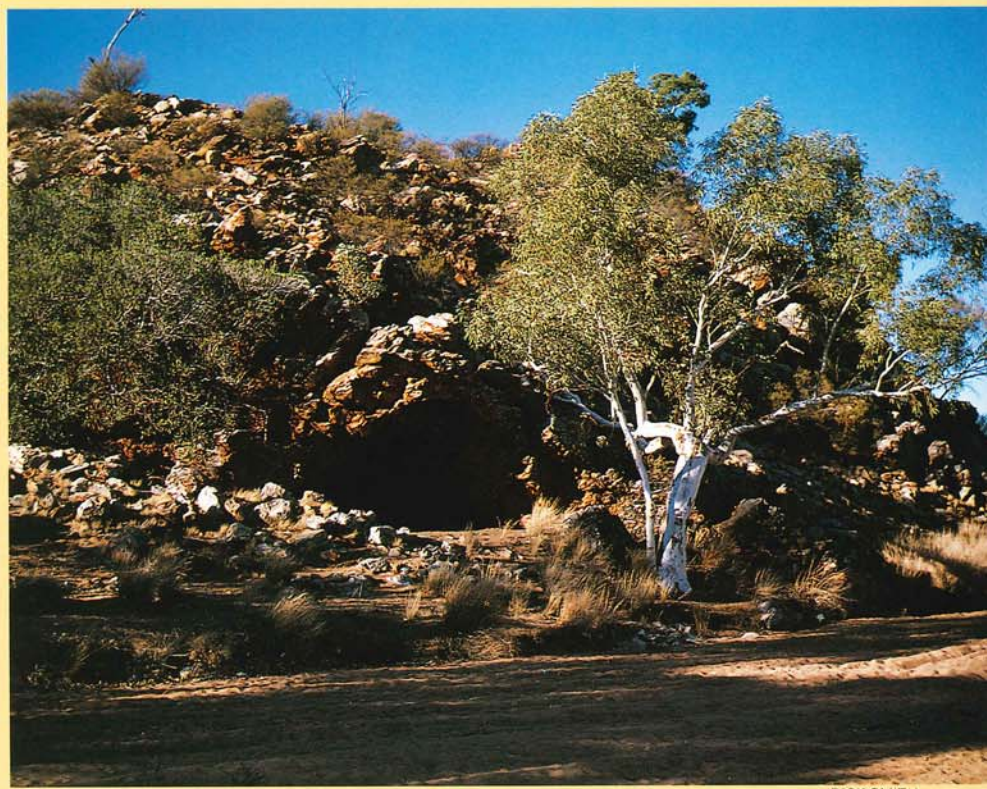
sloppy mud south of the Petermanns, and thinking what a remote situation we were in," he recalled.

The 1966 search for Lasseter's grave was unsuccessful, and on the following trips Bob was looking for reefs. However, in 1971 two Pitjantjatjara men helped locate the grave. "They took us through some very rough country," Bob remembers. "We had to walk the last six miles to the grave, and I'm very doubtful now if I would've found it alone . . . they took me straight to it."

Pitjantjatjara men have helped Bob on other occasions, such as the 1975 expedition to build a concreted stone cairn at Lasseter's grave – no easy feat by the virtually waterless Irving Creek. The two Aborigines, Leslie Mantanji and Joseph Donald, went ahead to clear grass from the grave, and they later dug a soak to get water for the concrete.

Exploring Australia's heartlands one experiences great beauty and

*continued page 49*



DICK SMITH

Lasseter's cave, from inside and out. "My God why does not help come!" he wrote, spending the final month of his life here, slowly starving and wondering in vain.

*Sydney's Daily Mirror reports the discovery of Lasseter's body.*



COURTESY ALISON COOTE





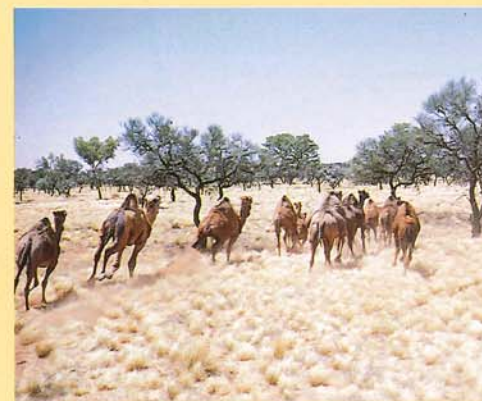


PHOTOS BOB LASSETER

Bob Lasseter improvises a telescope rest on his 1966 expedition.



Left: Bob and son-in-law Danny Hall erect a new cairn at the Lasseter gravesite in 1975. Aboriginal helpers beside finished cairn.



Left: Bob and Aborigines witness camels bolting and theorise about the events of 1930.

exhilaration, but they come at a cost, as Bob Lasseter knows only too well: "Mending punctures every day, putting up with mechanical breakdowns, the mixture of sand and grease getting up your arms . . . On one trip we were out here as late as November and the heat was absolutely awful. I thought of my father then, of what it must have been like when he was at the cave."

But the hardships have not deterred Bob from his primary goal of locating his father's reef. He has studied geology, but his reef searching has mainly been based on interpreting Lasseter's movements after he left Ilbilla alone.

Ironically Bob has covered far more country than Lasseter ever did, and he has flown not one but dozens of reconnaissance flights in the area. The technological gulf between Bob's mode of transport and his father's plodding camels was highlighted when we flew in a few hours over country Lasseter took weeks to cover. It seemed almost like cheating.

Yet, despite all the searching, no tangible evidence of any gold-bearing reef has emerged. Camped by Lasseter's cave one night, I asked Bob if

he really believed his father had located a reef, and if he could find it. "I'm certain there's a reef," Bob replied. "I've naturally eliminated the easier areas to get to, and I think it's just out there in that more difficult country. I still feel pretty hopeful."

## Examining the Evidence

**D**O GEOLOGISTS set any store by Lasseter's reef? Traces of copper, silver and gold have been found in the Petermann-Bloods Range area, but geologists I spoke with dismissed the area's gold-bearing potential and most pointed to the numerous prospectors and expeditions that have already investigated its outcrops.

The Bureau of Mineral Resources made the first comprehensive geological maps of the area in the early 1960s. David Forman, one of their party, remains convinced that only insignificant traces of gold exist in the Petermann-Rawlinson-Bloods Range area. But he remembered yarning about Lasseter in the bush, and added:

"The chances are negligible, but that's not to say there isn't a reef out there."

Forman does support Bob's view that the area's inhospitable, rugged nature has limited widespread prospecting. "It hasn't even been scratched," Bob insisted.

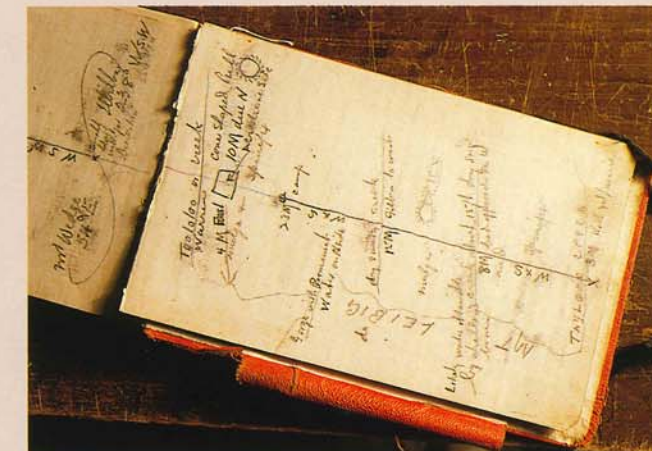
Former Chief Minister of the Northern Territory, Paul Everingham, who backed the naming of the Lasseter Highway in 1983, doesn't rule out the possibility of the reef existing. "There had to be something in it to get him to go out into that forbidding country. I think it's possible - it's a big country."

In order to assess the probability of the reef's existence one must examine the man, and in particular the last months of his life. If the legend's facade is stripped away what is left? Truth, falsehood or some grey middle ground?

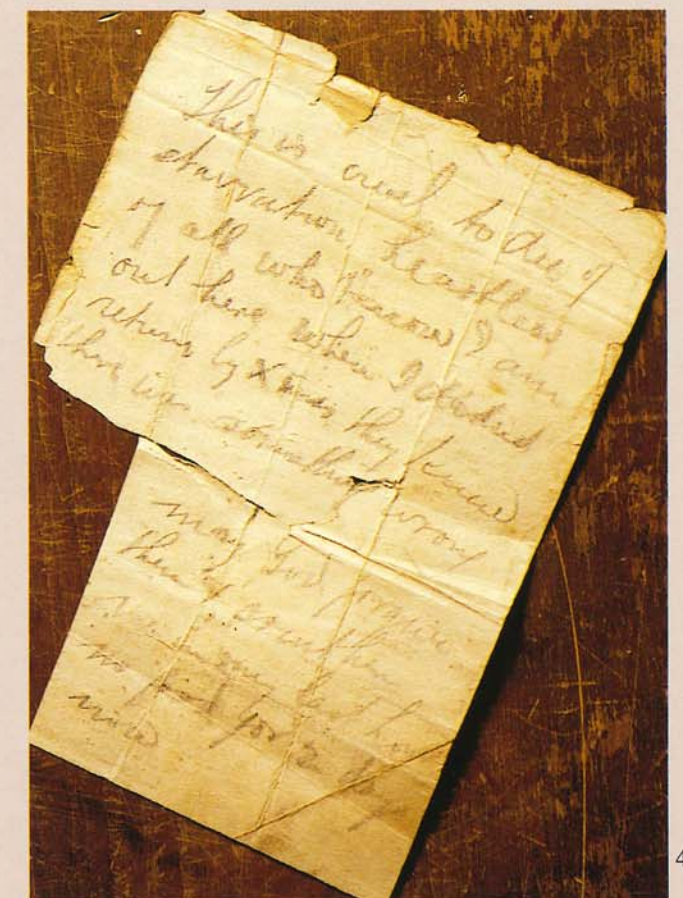
I left to retrace Lasseter's journey very dubious about the story, but my views changed significantly while camped in the bush. One thought recurred endlessly: was Lasseter's diary a forgery, as has often been claimed? If so, his credibility would be shattered.



Lasseter's poignant diary entries tell the story of a quest which failed.



PHOTOS COURTESY MITCHELL LIBRARY, STATE LIBRARY OF NSW







Three generations of Lasseters. Bob Lasseter and his daughter Jenny at the memorial sculpture of Bob's father at the grave in Alice Springs. Harold Lasseter's body was brought here by an American film crew and re-buried.

I studied Lasseter's original diary at Sydney's Mitchell Library, and three facts convinced me that the diary is the genuine record of the last weeks of Lasseter's life: the fragile papers are partly destroyed by ants and heat, and show the slight grubbiness typical of a field diary; it would take a most sensitive imagination to capture the diary's sense of a dying man's mind almost adrift; and most importantly the handwriting is undoubtedly identical to that in Lasseter's 1929 letters.

But could Lasseter have written the diary and somehow 'disappeared'? Without exception stories of Lasseter disappearing rely on hearsay, circumstantial evidence and highly biased accounts such as Blakeley's. The hard evidence is Lasseter's diary record of his gradual death by starvation, and the recollections of elderly Pitjantjatjara men both now and back in 1931. They remembered vividly a white man whose camels bolted, who regularly wrote in 'a book', and who slowly died suffering from sandy blight and dysentery.

Fred Newnham believes Lasseter's death reflects a real belief in the reef. "A man's not a fraud if he believes sincerely, and the fact remains, Lasseter took great risks with his life – and from what I know of real frauds, they bail out."

The diary contains one most revealing sentence: "I think it (starvation)

the worst possible death with one experience of this country I should never have gone alone . . ." Lasseter always claimed to have been alone and later lost when he first discovered the reef.

"I reckon it's quite feasible he did find gold," modern-day cameleer Noel Fullerton theorised, "but the country gave him such a bloody fright he just didn't want to go back into it until many years later."

The letters Lasseter wrote about the reef to government departments in 1929 suggest a man of powerful vision, a thinker. If Lasseter had found

The Aborigine who helped Lasseter reach Irving Creek.

COURTESY ALISON COOTE



a reef, he may well have exaggerated its value over the years. "I've struck men with dreams," Fred Newnham says, "and they go to all sorts of troubles because their dreams are exaggerated in their minds." Prospectors often select biased samples, and Bob Lasseter admits that his father may have exaggerated the reef's value over time.

## An Aboriginal Perspective

**I**F THE REEF DOES exist the local Aborigines would certainly know of it. They would have watched Lasseter closely, memorising every journey he made. And their knowledge of the landscape is encyclopaedic, a fact highlighted when Pitjantjatjara men relocated Lasseter's grave in 1957.

Aborigines are most reluctant to discuss the subject at all, although a few have stated that Lasseter's reef does exist, indicating that it is by a sacred site. The western Petermann-Blood Range area that Lasseter returned to alone has particularly sacred areas, and Lasseter himself wrote, "the blacks have a sacred place nearby and will pull the peg up for sure."

The desert people have a real sympathy for Lasseter's fate, and when the Pitjantjatjara discovered he had left a son they were deeply moved. However, there is also a fear of European intrusions, accentuated now by the possible weakening of Land Rights legislation, and if Lasseter's reef were to exist by a sacred site no Aborigine would take an outsider to it, not even Bob.

Thus Bob Lasseter faces almost insurmountable difficulties in attempting to relocate his father's reef. The fine details of its description and location passed into oblivion with Lasseter, and searching even a localised area of central Australia is a daunting task. Yet Bob remains quietly hopeful: "When I turned 40 I thought I would find the reef in 10 years. It's now 20 years . . . and I still haven't found it. I haven't devoted enough effort to it, but the picture has been getting clearer all the time."

Bob candidly admits that gold has little or nothing to do with his expe-



One of many Aboriginal portraits taken by Errol Coote during the expedition.

ditions. "My main desire is that the reef be found. I would like to be the person to find it, but it's more important for the reef to be found than that I find it – you understand? It's because of my father, it's because of the family. We've had ridicule and controversy to put up with over the years and I would like to see an end to all that – and the most positive way to end it is to find the reef."

Aboriginal people I met all stressed the personal features of the quests of both father and son: their journeys, their difficulties, their feelings – aspects stressed in their own Dreamtime stories. After a death Aborigines traditionally leave the area for some time but eventually they return, to pay their last respects – to 'finish off business'.

"I think that's what Bob's doing," said Jugamurra, a Walpri Aborigine. "He hasn't finished his business yet, if you know what I mean. I think he wants to be really certain, to say, Okay, I know where my father's dreams were and that's it."

AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC thanks Tony Richards of the Stuart Motor Museum, Alice Springs; Mr Bob Lasseter and Mrs Alison Coote for their valuable assistance with this article.



Above: Bob Buck, who found the body after receiving advice from Pitjantjatjara men. Below: Bob Lasseter at his father's original burial site. In 1931 the words "Lassiter Died Jany 1931" were blazed in the tree bark. That and the unusual rock formations in the background helped Aborigines relocate the site.

DICK SMITH

