

FLOODBOUND SAGA

by Eric Rees (Shift Foreman, Acid) —

My 14 years old son, Joe, who is a member of a lapidary club, has, for a long time, wanted to go to Lightning Ridge, in north-west N.S.W. to look for opals. We had made many inquiries about the area and decided just after Christmas, when I was on holidays, that we would go there, just the two of us, the rest of the family having elected to stay at home.

Departure time was early in the morning of 6th January following an all-tarred roads route taking us through Murrurrundi, Breza, Gunnedah, Coonamble and Walgett to Pine Opal Lodge, a 5,000 acre sheep property some 30 miles N.W. of Walgett, which caters for tourists.

Pine Opal Lodge is conveniently situated, being in a central position to the three opal fields and has home units and camp sites available for visitors. Other attractions are tame animals running on the property and a programme of feeding wild birds daily.

Everything looked right for a good prospecting holiday. We could fossick all day and come back to the Lodge for a hot shower or a swim in the pool then have a good meal and a quiet night's rest.

It did not work out quite as planned!

We arrived at Pine Opal Lodge at 6.00 p.m. and while we were putting up our tent a storm broke causing us to run for shelter in a nearby shearing shed. It rained and blew all night. Next morning the property owner came to see how we had fared during the storm. He told us there had been four inches of rain over a wide area and the whole north-west of N.S.W. was flooded.

He further said that it could be a month before we would get our car out.

We did not really believe this at the time but events were to prove that he knew what he was talking about! The tent was never erected yet!

The Boomi, Gwyder, Barwon and Namoi Rivers all merge at Walgett and these rivers already swollen and running pretty well from the rain in southern Queensland had burst their banks cutting all roads and washing out many culverts.

The rain continued for another three days. Listening to the radio (which was about all we could do), we heard of the plight of the people in the area. In our case we were safe but with the nearest water only a half-mile away. The car was no good to us at all - we were isolated.

With the seriousness of the situation now apparent, we were asked what food we had. I had brought some tinned food which we thought we could supplement with bread, meat and other supplies from Lightning Ridge. We were advised to make the tinned food last as long as possible as no one knew just when we would be able to get any more. We also had a Christmas cake with us which came in very handy.

Early in the floods the emergency airstrip on the property could not be used but after drying out for a few days light aircraft began to bring in a little food to supply the neighbouring

properties and opal fields. I managed to get a loaf of bread, half pound of butter and a tin of fruit.

Meals had to be carefully planned. We would rise in the morning, have a small breakfast, nothing at mid-day then, in the evening we would look at our food supply and then decide what we could afford to eat.

Every tourist in the area had studied maps and many tried to find a way out. Some tried to get to Queensland and others through Brewarrina and Bourke. All returned. Some after being bogged and having to walk 20 miles for assistance. Joe and I stayed put.

After a week I notified my family that we were O.K. and would get back home whenever possible.

At about this time we were able to get through to Grawin and then Glangarry opal fields with caution as water was still over the roads in places. We did some fossicking around and managed to find six opals, which we had cut and polished. But we had lost our incentive to look for opals. The isolation firstly and then the steamy heat and sand flies upset us. We went down a mine cut but only found very small opals.

The owners of Pine Opal Lodge, the Newton family, did their utmost to make our stay as pleasant as possible in the circumstances. It was they who made it possible for us all to fly by light plane to Walgett and then direct to Sydney by Fokker Friendship for us 44 stranded tourists.

The plane trip opened our eyes to the extent of the flood-waters.

As far as the eye could see, in all directions there was water, with isolated