

The Last of the Norways.

By Richard Thorn & John Anderson

The following article appeared in *The Age*, a Melbourne newspaper, on 19th July 1951:-

“Not quitting cattle trek to have baby.”

DARWIN Wednesday

“Twenty-year-old Mrs Walter Norway, who is expecting a baby in 3 months, refuses to leave her drover husband who is “hawking” 1000 head of cattle across the Northern Territory to Queensland.

Mrs Norway realises her baby may be born on the droving trip. She and her husband have already driven the cattle 1500 miles from Doris Vale Station to Newcastle Waters, which is at the crossing of the great N.T. stock route.

So far they have not sold any of the cattle. Mr Norway, his wife and assistants are prepared to drive the cattle into Queensland until they have sold the whole mob. Mrs Norway who is an expert rider is cooking for the whole team.

Mr Norway said to his wife refused to leave the party and travel to Queensland so the baby could be born in hospital. “I have tried hard to make her go, but she persistently refuses”, he said.

Mr Norway has so far lost 30 head of cattle from a mystery disease. The disease kills beasts suddenly. A beast suffering from the disease suddenly turns a somersault, bellows loudly and then dies.

Local cattlemen have not heard of the disease before and have reported the outbreak to the Animal Industry division of the N.T. Administration.

On one section of the stock route the cattle had to go without water for three days.

Mr Norway began his droving career only last year.”

When he read this article Nevil Shute Norway was intrigued and wondered if, by any remote chance, these Norways were some distant relatives. The following year he got his chance to track down Walter Norway when he and fellow author Alan Moorehead made a trip up to the north of Australia. Moorehead recounted the search in his book *“Rum Jungle”* published in 1953. To protect Shute’s identity, he used ‘X’ in place of Norway in the book and replaced Walter with William. Because ‘X’ is so clearly Nevil Norway we have used the true names in reproducing the following extract from *Rum Jungle*.

Moorehead is writing about the plight of indigenous Australians in the 1950s.

“..They feel, naturally, that they must make a fight not to slip back into the primitive life of their black ancestors, but when they try to thrust themselves into

the white man's society they find there a system of taboos as strong as anything in the native past they have left behind. They struggle for a while and then, usually, they give up. Either they marry among themselves or they lose heart entirely and sink back gradually into the life of the native encampments. There is nothing very dramatic about this, it is a slow and fairly painless evil; the hopeless and haphazard cycle rolls on from day to day relieved by a gesture and a kind word here and there, and as yet there have been no riots. The problem is still so small that nobody bothers about it very much, and I doubt whether I myself would ever have noticed it but for a friend, an Englishman, who now lives in Australia.

This man - Nevil Norway - believed himself to be the last of the Norways; with him the family name dies out. He was therefore a good deal intrigued one day when he saw in a Melbourne paper a paragraph stating that the wife of a certain Walter Norway, a drover, had given birth to a child while she and her husband were taking a mob of cattle across the northern plains.

In the winter of 1952 my friend Norway travelled with me on my trip to the north, and he at once began to make inquiries about his namesake. In Alice Springs nobody had any information, which was strange in that country where distance means nothing and every man is a distinct personality known for a thousand miles around. As we went north we kept on inquiring at all the wayside townships, but it was not until we got to a particularly remote spot on the edge of the tropics - it was a battered wooden store in a wilderness of mulga scrub - that the man behind the counter nodded and said yes, he knew Walter Norway. And he added sourly, 'He won't come back here any more.'

We asked, mildly, why not.

'Too many puppies.'

We got this translated (it means too many bad debts), and the storekeeper went on to state that he considered young Walter Norway to be a drunkard, a swindler, and a very bad character indeed.

We went on then to the next police station some fifty miles up the road, and there they also knew Walter Norway quite well. But they thought the storekeeper had exaggerated. Walter was not a bad lad, they said. He was a wonderful drover, a horseman who could break in any wild brumby from the plains, and he seemed to have some special understanding of cattle. Usually he was in great demand in the droving season, but it was some months since they had seen him. Possibly he was down at Djarra (now Dajarra)- the policeman waved his hand towards the void. Djarra was a thousand miles away.

A couple of weeks later we found ourselves at the mining town of Mount Isa, not far from Djarra-a mere hundred miles. But the road was appalling and our time was running out. We found a taxi-driver in Mount Isa who in his spare time flew an ancient Fox Moth as a hobby, and he agreed to take us down to Djarra. There was just room for the three of us in the plane, and we travelled not much faster than a modern car over a landscape which is as lonely and moonlike as the deserts of Africa. At Djarra, a collection of iron and wooden shanties in endless space, there were two mobs-one of cattle and the other of goats-grazing across the flat space that served as a landing field. We dived and

scared the goats off first, and then turned and dived on the cattle. Then we came into a dusty tussocky landing and walked into the town. At the police station they looked at us with some surprise when we asked about Walter Norway; but they said we would find him in the pub. We had a certain feeling of elation then as we went through the swing doors of the public bar. And there, leaning against the counter, drunk, and with an exceedingly black skin, stood the last of the Norways.

He was a boy of twenty-three or twenty-four with very thick black, curly hair, a cattleman's wide-brimmed hat on the back of his head, and he was wearing a coloured shirt and tattered trousers. His high-heeled elastic-sided boots had split across the insteps. He was very dirty and not very cheerful. He achieved, however, a grunted 'Good day' as we came in, and my friend Norway asked him if he would like a drink. Walter at once tossed off the remains of his gin and held forward his empty glass.

I do not think that at that moment my friend was particularly relishing the conversation that lay ahead, but he tackled it manfully. 'Is your name Walter Norway?' he asked. Yes. 'Funny thing,' said Norway, 'so is mine.' Then the boy smiled. It was a charming smile, very white teeth in the dark aboriginal face, and presently he began to talk easily and pleasantly in a soft, slightly hesitant voice.

He was born, he thought, in Alice Springs. He had never seen his parents; he had simply been told that his father was white and his mother black. As a boy he had been educated and cared for by a white family in Alice Springs, but they too had vanished out of his life, and in some way he had kept himself going with odd jobs on the cattle stations. He had grown up with horses and cattle, and he loved them. At eighteen he had become a drover in his own right, one of the best (this we confirmed later on from the people in the town). He had never had a drink until the year before, and he had never been out of a job. What started his drinking? He didn't know. Something to do with his marriage, he said vaguely.

It was indeed, as we found out later, a great deal to do with his marriage. He had married in the only way that was open to him, into a family half-native, and half half-caste, and his wife's relatives were illiterate, squalid, and hopelessly poor. Little by little they had engulfed him. He found himself living not only with his wife but with all her family as well, and in the native way, sleeping on sacking on the floor, eating with his hands.

Young Walter did not seem to me to be a very strong character, and perhaps he had not put up much of a struggle. Still one could see his point; it cannot have been very easy living in a family where only he could read or write. Nothing the white men had taught him had been of much use in the end. He had no one to talk to.

He put all this to us without complaint, but with a kind of easy fatalism; it had to happen, he said. What the hell? Now he was out of a job and on the way to becoming a souse. And he asked us to join him in another gin. It was, on the whole, a commonplace little tragedy, but my friend Norway is a kindly character. Perhaps he was most affected, as I was, by the fact that this boy had had a glimpse of pride and independence, when he was one of the finest horsemen in the north and game to take on any mob of cattle, however wild they were and however bad the drought. At all events, Norway was making

certain arrangements when I left Australia. He was moving young Walter down to Alice Springs with his wife and baby, but without the rest of the family. He was advancing him some hundreds of pounds so that he could build a house, and he had found him a job. By now, I imagine, the last of the Norways must be getting back on to his feet again.

I asked my friend Norway before I left if he really had known nothing of Walter's origins.

'Well,' he said, 'there was an uncle in our family, a doctor, who was supposed to be rather a wild character. He came out to Australia from England some time last century. But we never heard what became of him, or what he did when he got here.'

Further research.

It transpires that Walter Norway was the illegitimate son of Reg Lawson, ex-postmaster at Barrow Creek and his mother was "Stumpy" an Aboriginal woman. He was at school in Alice Springs and it was whilst there that he was given the surname Norway. His wife Grace was the daughter of Joseph and Mary Craigie and was one of 8 children born to the couple.

It seems that Walter Norway did get back on his feet, for he is listed in the Queensland Electoral Roll for 1959, living in Dajarra, with his occupation given as stockman. He and Grace had three daughters, Venus, Julie and Gloria. Presumably it would have been the first-born, Venus, who was born on the trail.

By 1980 Walter, Grace and daughter Julie were living at 32 Henry Street in Cloncurry.

.Final remarks.

Shute's generosity in providing financial support to a case like this is typical of the man.

A second point is that this tale of a drover's wife giving birth on the trail, suitably adapted, found its way into *In the Wet*. David Anderson was born to Jock Anderson and his half-caste wife Mary as described in the newspaper article, with Roger Hargreaves performing the baptism.

Here is another example, if one were needed, of Shute adapting a real life event into one of his novels.

References

The Age, Melbourne, 19th July 1951

Alan Moorehead, *Rum Jungle*, Hamish Hamilton, 1953 p.61-65

Northern Territory Administration, Native Affairs Department, letter of 21st August 1952 – establishing Walter Norway's parentage and surname.

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