Excerpts from *Son of Jimmy* by Jack Gibbs

Excerpt 1: Acknowledgments

Many people have supported the writing of my life’s story. The Northern Territory Government, through its History Awards provided a grant which covered many of the costs involved and I am grateful for such support. Terry Robinson very generously helped with the tape recording, transcriptions and early editorial work. His work ensured that the project got off to a good start. Suzanne Parry provided guidance and undertook to complete the final editorial work. She also negotiated the book’s publication with the Historical Society. I am grateful for both Suzanne’s and Terry’s assistance. My final thanks go to Nancy, who endured the ups and downs of the book’s preparation with willingness and good grace. As always I owe her much.

Excerpt 2: Editor’s note

Jack has long enjoyed sharing the story of his life with his friends. Many are the nights when over a glass of beer or out fishing we have been regaled with tales, sometimes sad, often amusing and always interesting of Jack’s years as a stockman or his years on Channel Island. We never ceased to be amazed at the clarity of Jack’s memory, even as he reached old age. He recalled dates with accuracy and remembered names of people long since gone from the Territory. He needed no prompting to recall people with whom he had been associated and the liveliness of his mind and the warm of his affections was always evident.

Such was Jack’s enjoyment of telling such tales, he took very little persuading to record his full story. As he mentions in the closing pages of this book, Jack has had very little opportunity for formal education and his writing skills are limited. But, as Jack’s ‘book’ was to be uniquely his, the method of working was for Jack to record onto cassette tape and for this to be transcribed verbatim. Only minor editing was done to remove repetitions and some broken sentences which Jack had corrected. The chronological approach was Jack’s choice and was always typical of his story telling style. The sense of before and after, and of things moving on, was important to the way in which he viewed his life and so it has been maintained here. What the reader doesn’t have the privilege of its hearing Jack’s voice; the chuckles which frequently came closing to choking him as he remember amusing events, the drone of his voice as he moved through days of droving which all seemed the same and Aboriginal accent which told so much of his life.

Excerpt 3: pages 94–95

… We camped there. I just couldn’t go on from there. It was impossible to put my boots on. So I had to pull out because of the pain. They were pretty short handed in the camp, but I couldn’t help it.

I got a message through a Tennant Creek and an ambulance came and picked me up and took me to the hospital. I was there for about three or four weeks. They operated and took some bones out of my foot. I don’t know how Doug Scobie got on, but I couldn’t help it.

I went back to Alice Springs. I couldn’t work for a while because of my crook foot. I was there for about three or four weeks. The foot was not too bad then and a bloke by the name of Alex Stettam, from the council, gave me a job driving a mosquito gang around. The boys had a pack on their back and pump spray down the wells or wherever water was lying about to keep the mosquitoes down. I must have been there for six or eight months, working with the council mob and I had a lot of trouble again with my foot. It was now getting numb, so I reported it to the doctor and told him what was happening with my foot and they sent me to Darwin for a further check up. That was in 1947.

In Darwin they took a blood sample from me and told me there was a nothing wrong with me. They couldn’t find any leprosy or anything like that. I worked at the Number 2 ward at the hospital, stacking linen, sweeping out the ward and around the hospital and so on. It was nearly the end of that year I went back to the Alice, and to my wife, again. I stayed on there working, and was able to work. My foot was still giving me a lot of trouble. They sent me back to Darwin again to see if they could find something wrong. They found that I had Hansen’s disease. I was sent over to the Channel Island Leprosarium. It was 8 March 1948. Melba stayed in Alice Springs. I didn’t know how long I would be at Channel Island, maybe forever.

When I was admitted to Channel Island I heard that Charlie Sweeney, who had worked for Dad from 1915 when Dad first started up until we shifted to the new St Vidgeon in 1924, had died at Channel Island in 1947 from a broken hip. My uncle Joshua from Ngukurr Mission also died on Channel Island in 1952. I was there when he died. He was very religious. When he was dying he threw his arms up three times and cried, ‘Lord, Lord, Lord’. He was buried where the new power station is, on Channel Island. They dug up his remains and sent them back to his country – down on the Roper River when the power station was built.

I met Nancy Croft over there. Nancy was the little Golden Syrup eater from the Kahlin Compound who I told you about earlier. Another couple of years on Channel Island and the government decided they were going to shift the leprosarium over to East Arm on the mainland. That was 1954. They had a few problems on Channel Island because they had to cart water over there to the island on barges and there was no proper sewerage there either. I stayed on there, at East Arm, it must have only been a few months, and I got discharged.

I had no job for a while. I was idling around doing a bit of fishing and crabbing. If I got some crabs I’d sell them down the pub and get a few pounds that way. I’d sell some fish or whatever I could get.

I eventually got a job with Luke Saab. He was at the at [sic] Ten Mile. There’s a slaughter yard there a few miles down the edge of the mangroves. There were some cattle there, but there wasn’t much feed around the paddock so I was taking the bullocks out for a feed, a good feed, and putting them back in the yard or in the paddock during the night. I was there for a fair while with Luke, helping him out at the slaughter yard.

Excerpt 4: pages 112–114

The next day we went up to the store. Danny Spriggs was there and he said nothing about what happened. They couldn’t have told him. He said, ‘If you feel like making a garden Jack I’ve got a thing like a mower here and it can dig up soil’. I was all on this and I said, ‘Where is it?’. He said, ‘Over in the shed.’ We went over and inspected this thing and I said, ‘It hasn’t been used for a long time.’ We mucked around there and got it stated and I took it down from the store, down to flat. There was beautiful soil there. The army had a vegetable garden there during the war. I went down to one end of the paddock and started this thing going and I was ploughing along and I had rotary hoed a couple of hundred yards. When that was finished I took the think [sic] back to the store again and he had some watermelon and rockmelon seeds there and he said, ‘You can take these seeds and plant them down there is you like and pay me for them later on’. Me and Nancy went down and started putting these watermelon and rockmelon seeds in, right up to the end of the garden. It was still raining at that time and it wasn’t very long before the seeds started to come up and there were watermelons starting on the vines, about a month or so after we put them in. We used to go down and inspect them from time to time.

We kept on living off the land. Paddy would come sometimes and bring us some corned meat. It was a bit of a relief from the kangaroo and things that we’d been eating.

That was about 1960, about June or July. The watermelons were just about ready to be picked off the vines when Dr Hargrave, the doctor from the Leprosarium, called in at the store. He’d done the rounds of the stations and he way on his way back to Darwin. Danny Spriggs sort of mentioned me and Nancy and he asked to see us. Danny came down and picked us up and took us to the store to see him. I had an ulcerated foot, the same old trouble. This time it was rubbing in my boot. He said, ‘You’d better come back to East Arm Jack and get on the pension’. I hadn’t been getting the pension. Nancy was getting about nine pound a fortnight, or something like that and that helped. Before Dr Hargraves left Danny Spriggs told him that he was thinking of going in to Darwin in about a weeks time and he would bring us out to the East Arm Leprosarium and he would be very pleased to be able to help.

Danny picked us up one morning and took us to East Arm. I had an operation about a week later. Nancy was doing some weaving there with the other womenfolk so she was occupied and happy. After the operation there I could get about a bit better. They had a small bus at East Arm and I drove Nancy and the girls to Bynoe Harbour to get a break from the treatment. After I came back someone would drive the boys out for a bit of a break also.

There was an old mine out there and there were no fish in the creek or the billabong. They had all probably died. I threw pebbles in there to try and attract some fish but there were none. We camped further around where there were some billabongs and springs, and caught some bream. There were plenty of kangaroos and bandicoots. We’d been out there for about three weeks and then came back. After we came back the boys would go down and have a bit of break away from the treatment too.

There was plenty to do around East Arm Hospital. Nancy was busy with the other girls weaving and I had a team of boys I’d take around with sickles to keep the grass down. We didn’t have any mowers because they were always breaking down anyway. The grass was growing fast and we had to go out and start cutting it down with a sickle. All around East Arm there was long grass. That kept us busy there during the wet season. Some of the half-caste boys used to sneak over in the night to the garage, push the truck out of the hospital grounds and on to the road, start it up and go into town. This had been going on for a very long time and nobody caught them. They were very lucky that they never had an accident, they’d just go in and have a good time and come back before daylight and put it quietly back in the garage again and make out everything was all right.

There was, like I said, plenty to do around East Arm. They were all Catholic Sisters at East Arm and Sister Kathleen was in charge. I got on very well with her. The doctor would come out there to do operations from time to time, mostly on the hand-crippled mob or the people with bad feet.

When we got back to East Arm from Hayes Creek we still had Benny with us. They didn’t want any dogs around the place so I took a break from there and took his down to Katherine. I had a vehicle then. I took him to George Kruger’s place. The old dog wasn’t feeling very well because he had heartworm. I took him the vet and he examined him and said he had worms in the heart and there was nothing they could do for him. I stayed on there for a couple of weeks. The old dog was taking fits now and I had to carry him around. There was nothing that could be done for him. It really was too much for me, but I just had to stand it. One night he came over to me, much as to say ‘I’ll be leaving you’ and I said, ‘Alright, old man, see you in the morning.’ In the morning when I got up old Benny was lying outside the door. He was dead. So I dug a hole in the yard there and that’s where I buried him. In George Kruger’s yard.

I heard that the Old Man (my father) was coming to Katherine soon, and I thought I’d wait another week to see him. I was told that he was out with the Hood brothers at Mountain Valley Station, repairing saddles. It was raining heavily now and I had to get back to East Arm, to Nancy, so I gave up waiting for Dad and I went back to East Arm. We stayed on there for another three years, probably, doing the same old job. Nancy and I were ready to get discharged again.

When we pulled out, we went to Police Paddock and stayed with Agnes Daby. We were there for quite a long time with her. Nancy was babysitting the kid while Agnes was going out dancing. She used to like going out dancing. Nancy had her hands full.

Excerpt 6: pages 115–116

Chapter twenty four: East Arm, Terry’s Place and Oenpelli

After we left Agnes we met Terry Robinson. He had a five acre at the Nightcliff. It was quite a nice little place he had there and it was quiet. I was getting paid my pension again for a while. It stopped again after a couple of months and it was a very hard struggle then for me and Nancy. I talked to Terry about it.

He took me to see Jim Bowditch who was the editor of the newspaper and I showed him my foot and explained to him what had happened, how I was getting the pension for a while and the doctor had stopped it. Bowditch then made arrangements to go and see Dr Hargrave who had an office on the Esplanade, at the Health Department. He gave the doctor a good lecture and told him off but he wouldn’t do anything about it and sent me to his offsider – another doctor who gave me back my pension for a while.

We must have stayed at Terry’s place for two or three months. He was talking about moving to the East Alligator River to start a store there, and he asked me if Nancy and me would like to go with him.

We put up a bough shed down there and Alice, a Brinkin tribe girl, was doing the cooking for Terry and helping us put up the store. Me and Terry would go into Darwin to get some tucker and things to build the store and bring them back. Just up from the East Alligator crossing, near a rocky place, is where he was putting up the store. Now and then we’d get short of meat and we’d get over to Cannon Hill and we’d knock over a little steer, some small stuff, so we wouldn’t waste it. I used to salt most of it up. Sometimes we’d go down to the river and do some fishing. There were lots of barras there, and we’d catch about three or four and come back. Me and Nancy used to salt ours up sometimes, they’re very nice and tasty when they’re salted.

Water was a bit of a problem them. We had to go on a spring-fed rock hole. We’d take some water cans with us and we’d fill them all up and bring them back to the brough shed.

We had our hands full, me and Nancy. We’d go out and get straight Sand Palms. Terry would bring them back in the Toyota, to where he was building a store. Terry was doing the carpentering there and he was doing a good job too. After he had it put up he put the Sand Palms all around under the front of the counter and it looked real good. Sometimes white people, tourists, used to come to Cahill’s Crossing to do some fishing and they’d come to buy groceries and fishing gear and petrol from the store.

Terry was doing pretty good there, but his missus, Ethel, stayed in Darwin. She had crook kidneys at the time. Terry was getting a bit worried about her, he didn’t want to bring her out until he had everything fixed up proper. A few times there I had to take Nancy over to Oenpelli Mission. She used to get asthma. While I was over there I saw Mr Wilson, the boss, and asked him if he could give us a place there – I could do up some saddles in return for having us over there. Mr Wilson said that he would be happy to have us stay there.

We still stayed about six months with Terry. He had the store up now and I was getting a bit worried about Nancy getting this asthma, and we wouldn’t be able to get across over to the Mission if a flood came down or the tide maybe would stay up too long. So we left Terry’s place and went over to Oenpelli to stay.

I used to go out sometimes with the Mission boys mustering. I had some good fun over there. I was doing the saddles up, the broken gear and broken saddles. The guts was falling out of them – and I had to do them all up. It was a nice place over there, but Nancy was still getting her asthma. I don’t know why, it must have been the swamp or the grass or whatever it was there, that was giving her his asthma.

There were getting pretty short of meat and Mr Morrow was talking about getting some killers in. So young David, Mr Cook’s son, went out with the stockboys. He must have been around eight years of age at that time. They went across on the other side of the plain and into timber country. They must have gone for most of the day, until three or four o’clock in the afternoon. While they were rounding some scrubbers up young David went missing. They brought the killers back to the abattoirs and they now had to go and hunt for David. They rode round and searched everywhere, but no sign of him. David had just disappeared. They reported back that David couldn’t be found and then they put on some good trackers. He was probably riding around in a circle out there. Everyone was worried about him. Now, if he had let the reins go, the horse would probably bring him back home, but he must have been turning it the other way and that’s what happened, and why he got lost.

In the early morning Mr Morrow and the boys went out again to look for him. They found David all right. He’d hung on to his horse. He said that he got off the old horse but hung on to the rein. He thought he dozed off to sleep but he didn’t know where he was, so he stayed around until they found him. They brought him back in one piece next morning, so everything went well that time.

About a couple of months after that – it’s starting to rain now – I was still doing the saddles up when a plane flew in with Dr Hargrave on it. I had my ulcerated foot back again, from riding around mustering, and it was a bad one this time. Dr Hargrave had a look at it and said I’d have to go back to East Arm and he’d fix it up again. That was in 1967.

Excerpt 7: page 117

Chapter twenty five: Back to East Arm and Many Trips ‘Abroad’

I got on a plane and went to Darwin about a week after I saw the doctor. Nancy was now at the Mission on her own. The doctor operated on the foot and I got talking to the doctor and asked him if I could bring Nancy in from Oenpelli. He said, ‘All right, I’ll get her in’. So he sent for Nancy and brought her back to East Arm again, and she got a job in the canteen. She was the boss of the canteen there selling cool drinks, biscuits, food. It was quite a nice little place at East Arm.

After my foot healed up I went back to work around East Arm, cutting grass with the other boys. In 1968 I went back to Oenpelli to pick up all my gear. Nancy had left them behind when she came in.

I got my things out at Oenpelli and brought them back. I pulled up at Yorky Billy’s place at Spring Peak on the way back. He was getting on in years and he wanted some meat. He had a family. He had some horses around there and he asked me if I could go out and get him a killer. He told me to take a couple of pack-horses and knock over a beast and bring back the meat. I said, ‘All right, I’ll go out there and get if [sic] for you’. I had Peter Inverway with me. Me and him saddled up and we went out with a couple of pack-horses. We spotted a mob of scrubbers about a mile on and we went after them and I galloped right up to a little one and shot it in the loin. I then shot it in the forehead, bled it, and cut it up and brought it back to where Yorky Billy was living. He had a nice place there with a little spring, about five miles from Tom Opitz at Jim Jim Creek. The next day I was back at East Arm again. I was working like I had been all along, cutting the grass and keeping the place clean of rubbish. One day some of the half-caste boys got into a fight with the native mob who were playing billiards. A couple of the half-caste blokes knocked Billy down. It was on then – the other natives came all up with their spears and there were half-castes galloping in all directions. They raced up to the office and closed the door. The natives could have killed them otherwise. The only place they could get away from them was the boss’s place. After a while things quietened down.

There was a lot of trouble with these half-caste inmates. One day they pinched the truck and went into town and mucked around there. I don’t know what they did but Hargraves got fed up with them and they were arrested and thrown into the cooler they had there at East Arm. It wasn’t much of a place, a couple of rooms there. They put about half a dozen of them in there and must have thrown the key away because they were there a long time, it must have been nearly a couple of months or more. Some of the half-caste inmates would go and get some grog. They had a long tube which they would put in a bottle of wine and put it through the window and the blokes would suck the wine from inside the lock-up. They were never let out for exercise – they were kept in there. They had a toilet and a bathroom.

They had to build a lock-up at East Arm because one time a patient did something very bad and the Judge sentenced him to jail. The warders of the town jail were frightened of getting leprosy and they went on strike.

It was about 1970 now and me and Nancy took a trip to Kununurra and back to Timber Creek. We had a lot of money. There was about seven hundred dollars that we’d saved up...