Isolation at its Best

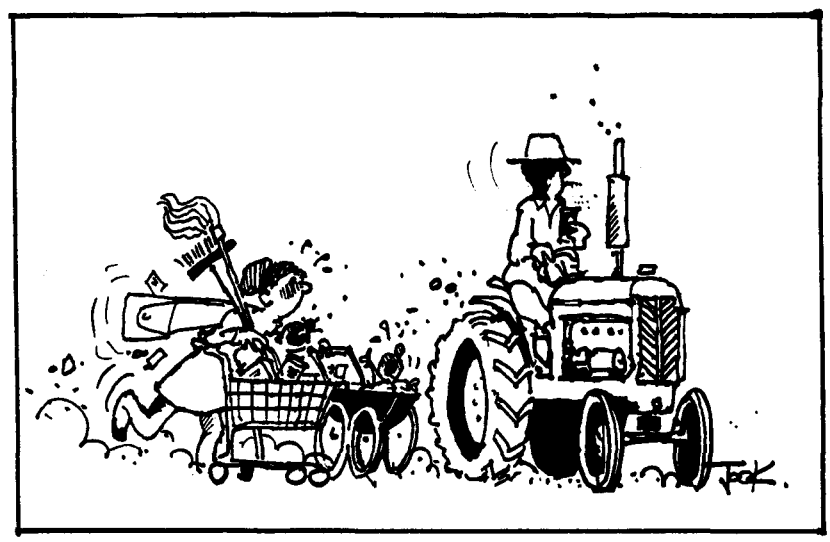
Jenny Cruise

Many efforts have been made to determine the differences between the meaning of 'rural' areas and 'isolated' areas, and it is not until you are provided with the occasion to venture forth into outer rural areas that you realise the true meaning of isolation.

In my position of 'Mobile Support Teacher, Wentworth Area', working with primary school children in the south-west of New South Wales, I have the opportunity to visit many station properties and families, and have gained an understanding of how these families cope with isolation.

Services that the urban and rural centres take for granted are scarce in this region. Postage is delivered by road once, sometimes twice a week by a mail contractor. Often food orders that have been rung through to town will be delivered via this service, at a cost, and if the contractor has space to take on the extra load. Sometimes weather conditions deter any deliveries for long periods of time. Mail boxes are usually located at the intersection of the shire road and the property road, resulting in a long drive from the homestead to the road to collect the mail. Outgoing mail is collected by the contractor and brought back to town for posting. There is no local milk bar, post office or hotel for these families. There are no hardware stores or service stations within at least a two hour drive. There are no made roads to their front gate, no garbage collections or medical services, and some of these properties are not on mains power.

Some properties do not even fall within a shire boundary, and are responsible for their own road making and power lines. If they run out of food, they do without. If vehicles or machinery fail, they patch them up. If there is a medical emergency, they make a mad dash to town, usually in the middle of the night, or contact the Royal Flying Doctor Service, who provides advice over the telephone about what medications or drugs to administer from the first-aid box provided to each property. (Often there is more than one household on the property, but the medical box is to be shared by all.) Families are self-sufficient, and would make the best urban home-handyperson look like a beginner.



The women are mothers, home educators, hosts, cooks, cleaners, gardeners, accountants, property managers, station hands, nurses, animal rearers, home maintainers, sausage makers and community workers. The men are farmers, graziers, mechanics, builders, plumbers, electricians, fencers, property managers, farm hands, dam builders, road graders and accountants. The children usually have set chores to undertake and are given responsibility for the household pets. Siblings appear to enjoy each others company far more than their city counterparts, as they have no other friends to play with on a daily basis. Often weeks will go by before the children have face-to-face contact with other children. During busy times, such as shearing, lamb marking and bringing in the crop, all the family digs in and helps. With the current economic crisis, many properties cannot afford to hire extra help during busy periods, and families are becoming more and more reliant on the assistance of neighbours, friends and relatives. Still they remain in good cheer.

At times, just being able to reach the property is no easy matter. It is a long, hard drive over the dirt roads, especially if they haven't been graded for a while or after bad weather. Side roads are often unmarked and the maps available are not always reliable. Visitors need to ascertain precise directions from the owners before setting out, and rely heavily on the trip metre to determine distances between landmarks. Often there are many gates to open and close along the way, and it is quite frightening to feel lost, or to break down in the middle of nowhere. It is a long time between passing cars and if a vehicle is not fitted with UHF radio, a driver may end up in a real predicament (stranded). Often instructions consist of "turn left after the seventh grid" or "turn right on the sweeping bend after the fourth gate" or "take the road that goes under the power line". Often the owners will provide a 'mud map'. This is a map that a short-cut, cross

Jenny Cruise is a Mobile Support Teacher with the NSW Country Area Program.

country route through their own and neighbouring properties. It is always a relief to come to the other end, often needing to be 'talked' through the route over the radio when unsure of directions. It is advisable to provide the station with an estimated time of arrival so that they can send out the search party if necessary. The UHF radio is a prime source of contact for the property, from station to the work vehicles and between neighbouring properties.

Travel is a major part of station life – within the broad bounds of properties; trips to town for supplies, school activities and community activities; visits to relatives; attendance at funerals and holidays. There is a strong feeling of community within these station families.

Other challenges faced in reaching properties are dodging kangaroos and emus which are intent on running vehicles off the road, missing pot-holes, skidding in sandy, gravelly or muddy patches, dealing with the bend that is sharper than anticipated and conquering wet, muddy tracks and river beds. A four wheel drive is essential, and the skills required to tackle these outback roads and tracks are certainly different to those of touring along bitumen country roads. Television advertisements portraying the excitement of four wheel driving in the outback certainly give no true indication of the danger involved in manipulating tricky roads, which station folk treat with care and respect.

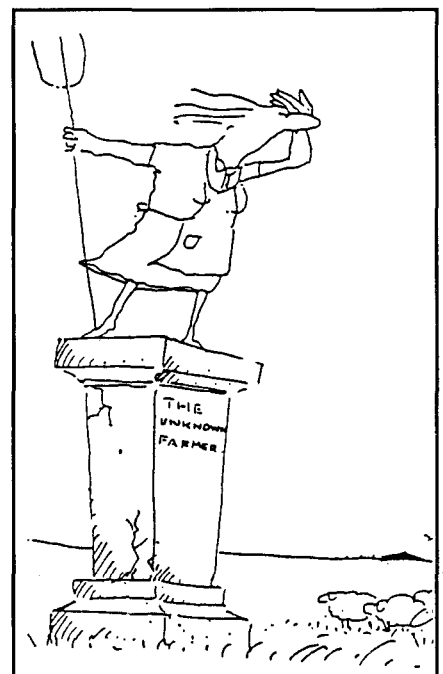
To drive these roads some basic mechanical knowledge is needed, including the ability to change a tyre. It is no good playing the helpless female and hoping for a good sort to come to assist; you could be waiting for a long, lonely time, and then the possibility would be that the station wife would be the one out and about and really put you to shame. These women are very adept at survival skills. Another extremely testing situation is being caught in a dust storm. It is very unnerving to be suddenly encased in pitch black dark, not knowing if you are still on the road – it is enough to make the strongest spirit hit the panic button.

Travel is a major part of station life – within the broad bounds of properties; trips to town for supplies, school activities and community activities; visits to relatives; attendance at funerals and holidays. There is a strong feeling of community within these station families. The 'grapevine' is very active and people are quick to rally around and provide assistance to neighbours in times of need. Race meetings, gymkhanas and field days are big events and well supported by the community.

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association provides support to many of the families, especially in the area of education. They are a lobby group with the purpose of ensuring educational equality, equity and participation for isolated children. The families visited by the Mobile Support Teacher have the common element of children being educated in their home by correspondence through the School of the Air in Broken Hill. This consists of lessons received through the mail and lessons transmitted by School of the Air. Children are supervised by their mother or by a governess. With the current economic climate, some families who previously employed a governess are now unable to afford the salary, and the mother has added school teacher to her list of roles/tasks, juggling her duties of assisting with the management of the property.

Most families set aside a special room or area as the school room, and take seriously the provision of quality education for their children. A mother could often have two or three children in the classroom as well as a toddler or two who cannot be shut out, and for untrained teachers they do a wonderful, committed job. They receive support from School of the Air, but only receive one home visit per family per year.

Unlike the urban mother, who bears little of the burden of her children's education, the isolated mother takes on this responsibility and ensures that her children attend their air lessons and complete the correspondence work as required. Again, the economic situation is playing havoc with the children's education, because hired help cannot be afforded, more and more pressure is placed on the mother, and often the older children (especially males) to assist with the property management.



Cartoon by Jenny Coopes
Reproduced from "Women on the Land"
NSW Women's Advisory Council.

The advantage of School of the Air is that the children are being provided with one-to-one tutoring, whereas in urban schools, with classes of 28-30 children, little one-to-one is available. The disadvantage is that children miss out on socialisation and group participation in activities. Curriculum areas such as sport, art and craft, music, computer studies and science cannot be covered in depth because of lack of resources, expertise and time. The role of the Mobile Support Teacher is to provide some of these activities, and to support the mother and governess in the provision of education. Area mini-schools are conducted on a regular basis, providing a social outlet as well as an educational setting for families. Attendance at mini-schools requires additional commitment and travel by families, but they agree that the three day mini-schools are of great benefit both to the children and to the supervisors. Families also attend two to three area workshops conducted by School of the Air and

travel to Broken Hill two to four times a year for school-based activities. One father quipped that it should be called 'School of the Road' instead of School of the Air.

There is no comparison between the traditional urban school room and the three day mini-schools, often conducted in the shearers' quarters. The students are fresh, keen and enthusiastic. The 'school' atmosphere is a novelty and is enjoyed. Students are not subjected to peer group pressure or influenced by the 'school system' as are their urban counterparts. They hang on the gate waiting for the teacher to arrive, and help unpack the vehicle to check out the new lot of goodies on board. They generally have a maturity and sense of responsibility beyond that of their city peers. The teacher is welcomed into the family and treated like a special guest (and feels like royalty with roast dinners and all sorts of delicacies for morning and afternoon smoko).

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How can you compare the city child who is driven to school by his mother and the isolated child who drives himself and his younger brother in the farm utility to the adjoining property to attend a mini-school, and drives back home again at the end of the day without the blink of an eye-lid. How can you compare the city child who has never seen a real sheep or cow, to the station child who can take you on a nature walk and teach you all about nesting birds and the life-cycle of insects, can assist in the birthing of lambs and calves, and takes for granted the life and death process. These children may be isolated and suffer from many aspects of inequality, lack of participation and inequity or resources, but are certainly compensated by enhanced life-skills and family unity.

When their children reach secondary schooling age, the parents sadly acknowledge that their children must leave the nest. A few remain at home undertaking secondary correspondence lessons, but the majority will be sent to boarding school, usually in Melbourne or Adelaide. There is no hostel accommodation in the town housing the nearest public secondary school, and the cost of private accommodation and travel would work out to be nearly as expensive as a private school anyway. By attending boarding school, the burden of long hours of travel for the student is eliminated and parents are assured that their child is receiving adequate supervision and control. One mother said:

> We have to accept that we only have our children for twelve years. It is not the same family feeling when they are only home for holidays, and it takes a lot of adjustment to sort out the 'pecking order' amongst the children.

Another option is for families to take on another house in town, with the mother and children moving to town for the week and returning to the property on the weekends. Obviously this is not a very satisfactory arrangement for the maintenance of family relationships, and places a great burden on the mother. Parents see education as being important for their children's future. Some children will return to work on the property, and will eventually take over the management of that property. Parents are now acknowledging that with the financial situation in which they currently find themselves, their properties will not be able to provide for two or three families, and so their children will need to pursue other careers.

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These isolated families have little access to the services that urban centres and rural towns take for granted: local shops, local medical and dental centres, banks, post-offices, hotels, garages/service centres, hardware outlets and take-away food.

A trip to town is undertaken, often under hazardous conditions (dirt roads) and frequently incurs the expense of overnight accommodation. Praise must be given to the station women who transport their children on lengthy trips so that they can participate in and attend school or community activities. They competently supervise their children's education, assist in the administrative and physical work on their property, keep house, work on local community committees and support their neighbours in times of need. They have very high values and need to be recognised and applauded for the way in which they have addressed and are dealing with the burdens of isolation, financial restraint and the education of their children.♦

Point and Counterpoint: Not the Last Word.

Chris Goddard is taking a well-earned break just for this issue. His popular column will be back in the next Children Australia, where, in the context of other articles which are exploring the question of ritualistic child abuse, Chris will discuss some aspects of organised child abuse.