

The Back of Beyond

Produced by the Shell Film Unit
1954

Press Kit

Synopsis

This 1954 classic takes a hard look at the development of inland Australia which largely depends on the men who keep open the supply lines and communications - the outback mailmen. In an area larger than Europe, beyond the last roads and railways, their tracks make the map of the inland, become the roads of tomorrow, and mark the growth of the nation. This is the story of one of those men and the people he serves...

Across the centre of Australia ran an ancient 300-mile track that, before the coming of white man, was used by Aborigines trading between north and south. Today it is called the Birdsville Track and joins Maree in South Australia to Birdsville in Queensland. Every fortnight a carrier called Kruse set out for Birdsville with supplies and mail for half a dozen cattle stations lying along the Track. The film follows Kruse on a typical trip and leaves him at various points along the route to tell stories associated with the areas through which he passes, including the ruins of the Kopperamann Lutheran Mission, the Flying Doctor, and the legend of the two lost children.

With its depiction of the harsh outback juxtaposed with a highly lyrical narrative and visual style, the film presents a view of the outback which is at once both realistic and romanticised.

Production Story

The Back of Beyond was made by the Shell Film Unit under the charge of John Heyer whose brief was to produce a documentary which would capture the essence of Australia.

Heyer visited Central Australia for three months to research the film, and then returned to Sydney to prepare a detailed shooting script. Douglas Stewart, the Australian poet, helped write the narration and dialogue.

The film was shot in 1952 following this script. It used local people in their own roles or in roles with which they were familiar. The narration and dialogue were dubbed later.

The voice-over narration is strongly poetic and spare like the landscape but insistently rhythmic:

*Mulka Mudroo
The place of the two mulga trees,
A hundred and fifty miles from Marree, halfway to Birdsville,
The loneliest store on earth,
With flour and treacle, tea and tobacco
Waiting for the traveller
Moving down the Track,
This week, next week, sometime.*

(from Post Production Script, ScreenSound Australia Collection No. 301)

The Unit took with it four four-wheel drive vehicles, an electricity generator, a radio transmitter and sound and camera gear. Once it left Marree, filmmakers had to be self-sufficient, providing their own living quarters, toilets and food.

As with other crews shooting in outback locations, the Unit faced many technical challenges. Film stock had to be protected from deterioration in the excessive temperatures; fine-powder-like dust was kept from the cameras and the flies were shooed off the lens!

Awards

The Back of Beyond was one of the first Australian films to make an impact at international film festivals. Major awards are as follows:

Grand Prix Assoluto, Venice, 1954
1st Prize, Montevideo, 1956
1st Prize, Trento, 1956
Diploma, Edinburgh, 1954
Diploma, Capetown, 1955
Diploma, Johannesburg, 1956

Biographies

John Heyer

Producer, Director and Writer
1916 - 2001

John Heyer was born in Devonport, Tasmania, in 1916. During his early career he worked with such luminaries as Charles Chauvel, Ken Hall and Frank Thring Senior. Heyer developed an intense interest in documentary films, but he turned his hand to all types of work on offer and developed his skills as a writer, producer and director. He became known as the "Father of the Realist Road Movie" through his award-winning films such as *Men and Mobs*, *The Valley is Ours* and *The Back of Beyond*. Actively involved in developing a national film culture in Australia, Heyer was recognised with an OBE in 1970 for services to film. In 1986 he was admitted to the European Academy for Arts, Sciences and Humanities and was awarded an Order of Australia in 1997 and died in the UK in 2001.

Tom Kruse

The Outback Mailman
1914 -

Esmond Gerald (Tom) Kruse, born at Waterloo in 1914, conquered sandhills, sand and dust storms, flies and floods, swollen rivers and creeks, bugs and bogs but he delivered the mail without fail, although sometimes a little late. For twenty-seven years, through summer heat or rain, never did the people along the Birdsville track go without their mail. Tom is, and was, an outback legend in his own time.

His truck, a Leyland Badger built in 1936, gave up the ghost in 1957 but was recently restored to its 1950s condition. After a last run by Tom in October 1999, to deliver more than 7000 letters from all over the world, the Badger is now housed at the Birdwood Museum. During that trip Tom raised much-needed donations for the Royal Flying Doctor Service from all those he found along the way.

Mail and other supplies for the people and stations along the Birdsville Track have been delivered since the late 1860s. The first government mail service was pioneered by Jack Hester in 1884 followed by a mail-passenger service opened in 1886 by August Helling, the son of a German migrant, using packhorses and buggy. From Birdsville it was George Roberts' job to get the mail to Cordillo Downs and Haddon Downs.

Tom Kruse started work for Harry Ding of Yunta in 1934. Tom was only twenty-two but a seasoned outback driver when he first 'attacked' the Birdsville Track and inaugurated the Mail Service for Harry Ding. Tom and his Aboriginal offsider, Henry Butler, had to find their own way through, and over, sand hills and around bogs as the mail and goods, plus the occasional passengers, had to get through once a fortnight. Once Tom had to make a detour of more than twenty kilometres, but he always managed to get through—eventually.

On one of his first runs Tom had to walk in 40 degrees heat to Mungerannie and back to Mulka for some assistance from Poddy Aiston to get a broken tailshaft fixed. Some of the well-known drivers who worked for Harry Ding to get the mail to Birdsville were Ken Crombie of Mungerannie, Tom Robinson and Fred Teague. In 1939 Tom helped with the supplies for Cecil Madigan who was the first European to cross the Simpson Desert by camel.

After his marriage to Valmai in 1942, Tom and his wife settled at Marree and became more or less branch managers for Ding at Marree and Lyndhurst. Round trips between Marree and Birdsville would normally take seven days but sometimes it took a lot longer. On one occasion he was away for six weeks.

In January 1948 Tom took on the Birdsville Mail contract on his own account and successfully owned and ran it for the next fifteen years until 1963. He reportedly had great difficulty retaining his employees, as conditions were so bad that they could not put up with the continuous problems and hard living.

On the 8th of April 1949, Tom left Marree with 815 pounds of mail and got through the Cooper floods and back in seven days. His next trip was not so fast. He got bogged at Pandie Pandie and had to be picked up by plane. Four years later the Page Family of four all died in the same spot because of heat and lack of water. As a result of the extensive flooding during 1948-49, the Beltana Pastoral Company asked for an aerial mail service but pilots often refused to land at waterlogged stations. The only one to get the mail through time and again was Tom. According to the people living along the Track there 'would never be another mailman like Tom'.

In 1953 Tom retired from the regular trips along the track and started an earthmoving and tank sinking business. He also starred in John Heyer's documentary 'The Back of Beyond', a film about mail deliveries on the Birdsville Track. It won the Grand Prix at the International film festival of Venice in 1954.

A year later, in the 1955 New Years' Honours, Tom was awarded an MBE for 'services to the community in the outback risking his life on many occasions'. The Governor, who had especially flown to Birdsville to present the MBE, had to return with the decoration as Tom was stranded on the Track somewhere, cut off by floodwaters. It was nearly a year later before Tom was able to receive his decoration, this time in Adelaide.

Tom's classic old Badger has been restored and now has a permanent home at the National Motor Museum in Birdwood, South Australia.

The Back of Beyond

Produced by the Shell Film Unit

Year of production: 1954
Duration: 65 min

Credits

Producer/Director: John Heyer
Writer: John Heyer (with script collaborators Janet Heyer and Roland Robinson)
Dialogue and narration: Douglas Stewart, John Heyer

Cinematographer: Ross Wood
Assistant Cinematographer: Keith Loone
Assistant Director: George Hughes
Composer: Sydney John Kay
Sound recordist: John Heath

Cast:

Tom Kruse
William Henry Butler
Jack the Dogger
Old Joe the Rainmaker
Bejah
Malcolm Arkaringa
The Oldfields of Etadinna
and the people of the Birdsville Track



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