

The man of bush letters - by the thousands

by Steve Meacham

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Delivering the mail along the Birdsville Track 50 years ago was routine for an outback legend, writes Steve Meacham.

Long before "our Nicole" met Tom Cruise, Australia had another film star of the same name. Admittedly, it was spelt differently - Tom Kruse - but it sounded the same, albeit with an Aussie drawl. And if the other Cruise helped our film industry by shooting one of his barely believable adventures here, his near-namesake earned his reputation for his real-life Missions Impossible.

Back in 1954 Kruse was Australia's best-known "Outback mailman", the subject of John Heyer's *The Back of Beyond*, one of the most celebrated documentaries made in this country.

It was a simple enough story. Heyer - who wrote, produced and directed what would become a classic - followed Kruse as he went about his ordinary business, delivering "the Royal Mail" (as it was in those days) along the Birdsville Track.

Each fortnight, Kruse and his Aboriginal sidekick, Henry Butler, would set off from Marree in South Australia and head north along a barely visible desert track towards Birdsville in western Queensland. Forget the well-graded, 4WD super highway the Birdsville Track is today. Back then, Esmond Gerald (Tom) Kruse would set off in his 1936-vintage Leyland Badger truck and often see no other vehicle on the entire 515-kilometre route. Sometimes the one-way journey took him six weeks.

Every day for 27 years, he would battle sand dunes, swollen rivers, creeks and bogs. Along the way he encountered such loners as "Jack the Dogger", earning money via dingo pelts; Old Joe the Rainmaker, convinced he could bring rain to the dry heart of Australia; and the men and women who lived a full day's drive from their nearest neighbour.

To the people of the Birdsville Track, he was their lifeline with the outside world - as crucial as the Royal Flying Doctor Service. And it was his proud boast that not once in those 27 years, did he fail to get through - even if it did mean turning up a few days late.

The Back of Beyond, made in 1952 and financed by the Shell Film Unit, confirmed Kruse's place as a bona fide "outback legend" (he was awarded an MBE for "outback services" in 1955). It also became part of Australian cinema history.

Heyer, who had worked with such luminaries as Charles Chauvel, Ken Hall and Frank Thring snr, became one of the first local documentary filmmakers to win awards at international festivals: Venice, Montevideo, Trento, Edinburgh, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

Today it might seem over-idealised and sentimental, leaning too heavily on a poetic narration and dramatised scenes which were clearly premeditated. But there's no doubting that *The Back of Beyond* has a beauty that still resonates half a century later. The photography alone has, arguably, never been surpassed.

Which is why the film - and three subsequent documentaries inspired by the Outback mailman - are about to be released as a double DVD, *The Back of Beyond Collection* (\$54.95), with proceeds going to the Royal Flying Doctor Service (1800813318).

To mark the 50th anniversary of the film - it was first screened on July 24, 1954 at Marree Town Hall - various characters associated with *The Back Of Beyond* will gather at the town on July 24-25 for a bush barbecue. It's expected to attract hundreds of people from all over the outback whose lives were shaped, one way or another, by the film. Word has it that grog will be brought into Marree for the occasion. Apart from Kruse - now 89 - there'll be his wife, Valma, the descendants of Henry Butler, and Elizabeth, the daughter of Heyer, who died in 2001.

Kruse's Leyland Badger finally gave up the ghost in 1957. But in 1999 it became the subject of another documentary, *Last Mail from Birdsville: The Story of Tom Kruse*, after friends persuaded him to have it renovated so that he could do a last fund-raising run for the RFDS, delivering 7000 letters from all over the world. Now restored, Kruse's truck is at the National Motor Museum at Birdwood, near Adelaide.

The other two documentaries in the tribute collection were filmed by the ABC - *The Outback Mailmen* (1986) and *The Postman* (part of the *Australian Story* series, broadcast in 1996).

So does Kruse still travel up the Birdsville Track? "Oh, yes," he says on the phone from his home in Adelaide. "We were lucky enough to be invited to travel up the track a couple of years ago. It was most enjoyable."

Further details: <http://www.lastmailfrombirdsville.com>