

The Overland Adventure

On 20 August 1908 Harry Dutton and Murray Aunger drove into Darwin aboard this very car, making history as the first people to bisect the continent of Australia from south to north by motor car. This was their second attempt and the coast to coast trip from the Southern Ocean to the Arafura Sea, from Adelaide to Darwin, took 51 days to complete. During this journey of 2100 miles across the harsh Australian landscape they crossed deserts, negotiated dry and wet creeks and rivers, traversed bogs, bush tracks and grasslands and even escaped a bushfire.

This intrepid journey took place only roughly fifty years after explorers such as John McDouall Stuart and Captain Sturt had successfully proved there was no great inland sea, a once widely held belief, in the arid centre of the continent. There were no roads or bridges, only the occasional track made by camel trains - it was a hostile land. Following the thin copper wire of the Overland Telegraph Line, the adventurers experienced the extremes of such a vast continent, from below freezing nights in the temperate zones around Adelaide, through the searing deserts of the centre, to the lush tropical landscape of the north. In the early twentieth century there was a perception that slowly the landscape was being tamed by those who had come to its shores. Conquering by motorcar was one of the final frontiers.

The first attempt

At 12 noon on 25 November 1907 Harry Dutton and Murray Aunger departed Adelaide General Post Office aboard a 1907 20 HP Talbot fondly named 'Angelina' by Dutton. On the first day as they passed through Adelaide along the route to Gawler and on to Kapunda, celebrations welcoming the travellers and wishing them luck were held with much merriment. They spent their first night in the comfort and grandeur of the Dutton family homestead - Anlaby. Supplies had also been sent ahead to Oodnadatta, Alice

Springs, Catherine Creek and Pine Creek. However, they had chosen the hottest months to travel through the centre of the continent and the wettest months for the northern region.

On 24 December 1907, after a heavy night's downpour near Tennant's Creek in the Northern Territory they were so deeply bogged the men finally admitted defeat – for the moment at least.

Success at last!

Roughly six months later, on 30 June 1908, the two intrepid adventurers once again began their trip from the Adelaide GPO with hundreds assembled to watch their departure.

...When the clock boomed out the hour, and the car got under way, hearty cheers were sent up from the crowd.

Excerpt from The Register, 1 July 1908

This time they were aboard a new 25 HP Talbot, The Overlander, recently imported from England. The body work was built in Australia specifically for the difficult conditions they were to face and was fitted with Michelin steel studded tyres and was packed with essential equipment such as shovels, axes, rifles, waterbags, fan belts, vice, goggles, coconut matting, blow lamp and spare tyres.

By 22 July the pair had reached Alice Springs. At this point a new member joined their team, Mr Ern Allchurch, the Alice Springs Telegraph Operator and provided a very useful third pair of hands. Just a few days later on July 31 they had reached Tennant's Creek and were able to recover the abandoned Angelina. Despite the six months the car had spent exposed to the elements with birds roosting in it, the car was in relatively good condition – even the tyres were still inflated.

During its long rest in the wilderness the old car became the home of numberless wasps, spiders, centipedes and other feminine nightmares, and despite a good cleaning out, it is stated that some hours after the car had resumed its long journey northward, spiders

etc could be seen emerging from various nooks and crannies and making a hurried dive for 'terra firma'.

The Northern Territory Times and Gazette, Editorial, 28 August 1908.

The dry centre of the continent presented great problems. Hidden in the long grass were termite mounds that could damage the underside of the car. Finding suitable sites to cross creek beds strewn with boulders turned out to be much easier and quicker than the slow progress made over the sandhills. However the tropical north, with flowing creeks and dense bush full of yellow spiders and green insects proved its own problems.

Having finally reached the town of Darwin it is no surprise that following such a challenging journey the men and the two vehicles were taken back to Adelaide by steamship.

After the journey Dutton published a book of photographs featuring a number of images of Aboriginal people encountered along the route. Clearly the travellers were as interested in the Indigenous people as the Aboriginal people were fascinated by the strange vehicle that brought travellers among them. Before colonisation there were at least 700 distinct Indigenous language groups in Australia. Dutton and Aunger's journey passed through country that covered approximately 20 different language groups.

Harry Dutton and Murray Aunger

Henry (Harry) Dutton (1879 – 1932) was born into a wealthy South Australian family.

The family homestead, Anlaby Station, was famous for its elaborate garden parties. The 250 square mile property included a manor house, a folly, cottages for the head gardener, coachman and kennel master, coach houses, stables and kennels, a deer park and acres of formal gardens home to peacocks. It even had its own cricket and football teams. Harry's father inherited the estate from his unmarried and childless uncle, Frederick Dutton, in 1890. In 1905 Harry married the beautiful Emily Martin, the daughter of a successful businessman and politician. Together they had three sons (including famed poet Geoffrey Dutton) and a daughter.

In 1908 owning a car was a luxury experienced only by the very wealthy. The Duttons were able to afford the cost of both Talbot vehicles used to complete the transcontinental crossing.

Horace Hooper Murray Aunger (1878 – 1953) was a talented and entrepreneurial engineer. He was also a successful sportsman, holding a number of cycling records including the South Australia 1 mile record in 1899 and the Australian 50 mile record in 1901. He even raced against American cycling champion Marshall Walter 'Major' Taylor.

Aunger's first experience with motor vehicles came through his employment with the Lewis Cycle Works in Adelaide, a pioneering motor cycle company. In 1895 Aunger and Tom O'Grady, foreman at the cycle works, created a motorised bicycle by adapting a Lewis triplet and installing a kerosene engine and tested it on Glen Osmond and Cross Roads in Adelaide. This was one of the first motorcycles in Australia. It was from this same company that Dutton purchased both the Talbot vehicles for the journey.