



Francis (Frank) Edwin Birtles - **“Australia’s Greatest Overlander”**

Born Melbourne 1881 – Died Sydney 1941

Frank earned his title by making what is estimated to be 80 expeditions in Australia and across the world by push bike, car and aeroplane covering around 800,000 kilometres – 100,000 on push bikes – mainly on trackless country

At 15 he left school and joined the merchant navy, and sailed “before the mast” – by 17 he had sailed twice around the globe.

Shortly after the Boer War broke out – 1899 – he jumped ship at Cape Town and joined the “Irregular Mounted Infantry” – very appropriate name for Frank! In 1902 he completed his war service, briefly returned to Australia, and returned to South Africa where he joined the Transvaal Police as a mounted Officer.

In 1905 he returned to Melbourne, working for a short time as a lithographic artist. This did not suit his wandering nature and in 1906 he first attacked the Melbourne to Sydney cycling record and then cycled from Fremantle to Sydney – a mere 5,000 km!

In 1907, unable to settle down he set off on a 16,000 km cycling journey which took him more than halfway around Australia via Darwin sponsored by Bennett & Wood on a “Speedwell” cycle

On his way back to home he initially followed the Overland telegraph and stage managed a “amazing meeting” with Harry Dutton and Murray Aunger in their 25hp Talbot who were making the first Adelaide to Darwin crossing – had a cup of tea and told them that cycling was “much easier”



Harry taking a rest break before winding up the canvas which they laid over sandy boggy areas to assist traction – note the hat and jacket in the Australian back country

Francis took note of these and took 2 rolls of rubberised canvas on the 1912 Brush Expedition

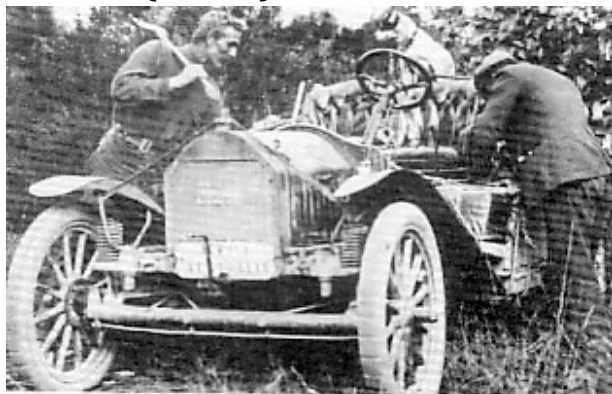
From Adelaide he pedalled

to Melbourne, then to Sydney, taking five and half days off the record – “a tame contrast to inland Australia”

In 1909 he cycled into the “Camel Country” of western Queensland and in 1911 he led a bicycle mounted cinematographic expedition to Darwin with Robert Primmer carrying a Gaumont 35mm movie camera, tripod and 50,000 feet of film etc. – an incredible load on a bike!

Later in 1911 he cycled 17,000 km from Sydney to Darwin, Broome, Fremantle, Adelaide, Melbourne and back to Sydney – breaking records all the way. From Darwin he was accompanied by “Dinkum” a blue heeler cross who provided invaluable protection from snakes and wild dogs. This was on a Dunlop “Marathon” cycle, having only five punctures, donated by Anthony Horderns. In 1912, the Canada Cycle and Motor Co. invited Frank to navigate for their mechanic, Syd Ferguson in a 1910 Brush, on an attempt to make the first West to East crossing of Australia in a motorcar. The Brush has a single cyl. 10hp 4-stroke motor, epicyclic gearbox, timber chassis and axles, chain drive and the motor turns anti-clockwise.





L to R - Frank, Rex and Syd and the 1910 Brush
Sydney Morning Herald 15th April 1912 - 2,600
miles in 28 days

"It was a quaint sight as the little runabout motor-
car began to climb Taverner's Hill - the Brush
carried the well-known overlander, Francis
Birtles, and the driver Sydney R Ferguson,
between the two weather beaten occupants was a
terrier dog - Rex The drive was a wonderful

testimony to the efficiency of the motor of to-day "

" They had completed the journey in 28 days, camping at nights and starting at 4 or 5
o'clock in the morning and averaging around 100 miles per diem.

As Birtles said, " We were heading due east all the time" It was a remarkable ride and the
pioneers of the motorcar ride from Fremantle to Sydney deserve every credit.

Two thirds of the drive was over new country and unmade tracks !

So began Frank's many motor-car expeditions around, across and throughout Australia
1912 in a "Flanders" auto-Sydney-Brisbane-Normanton with brother Clive. 1913 Cycle to
Cairns and Cooktown with "Dinkum" 1913 by T Ford, Charters Towers, Normanton,
Melbourne 5,600kms



1914 by T Ford -Melbourne, Adelaide, Burketown
with photographer Frank Hurley and later that
year, T Ford Melbourne, Adelaide, Coopers Creek
and Gulf of Carpentaria - 7,000 kms.

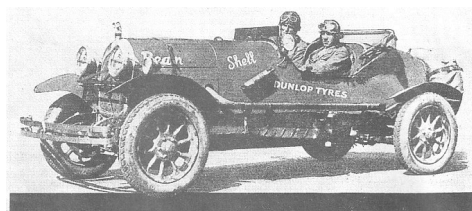
1915 T Ford Melbourne to Coopers Creek, 1916 T
Ford another trip to the Gulf - 1917-18 three trips
in a "Maxwell" - two to Fremantle and one to
Brisbane - then back on the bike and a 16,000km
ride Sydney, Darwin, Western Queensland,

Brisbane Sydney.

1920 Melbourne Press reported "Mr. Birtles is planning to open up Australia by
aeroplane" Frank was also planning aerial photography.

1921 to 1923 Frank had three Expeditions in an Oldsmobile 30HP, to Arnhem Land,
Darwin and Coopers Creek. Frank then achieved a speed record from Darwin to Adelaide
of 9 days 9 hours and 15 minutes - using giant floodlights to assist over the unmade track.

Sadly, Frank had been absent from Melbourne for too long and Frances divorced him !
Frank then went bush for 18 months in an Oldsmobile where he filmed Aboriginal Life
and Customs.

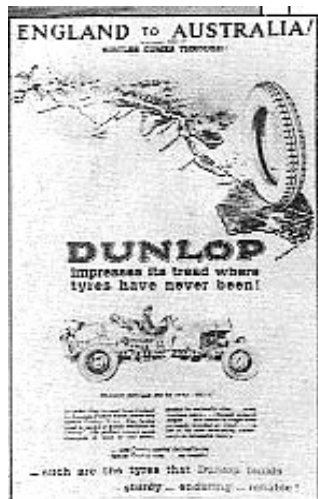


1924 saw Frank making a number of runs to Darwin in a
Bean Car -"Scarlet Runner" and a Bean Truck.

In 1925 the Bean Motor Co. gave him a 14.9HP Bean two
seater camouflage painted car. Frank labelled the car
"Sundowner" as it always turned up at an outback
homestead in time for supper. With Alec Barlow they set a

A Great Achievement
THE CONTINENT CROSSED
(Via Northern Territory, Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria)
3380 MILES—Darwin to Melbourne—in 205 HOURS

new record for Melbourne to Darwin of 9 days AND on the way back took only seven days at an ave of 800km per day !!!!



In 1927 Frank joined an Expedition as co-driver with Captain Billy Knowles to drive a new Bean Imperial Six from London to Melbourne to woo the Aussie public away from American vehicles. Unfortunately the late delivery of the car, an early European winter, radiator problems, Turkish officialdom and many breakages caused them to abandon the attempt in Delhi, as it was monsoon season. Undeterred Frank joined Bert Hinkler in preparation and fund raising for the first flight from England to Australia.

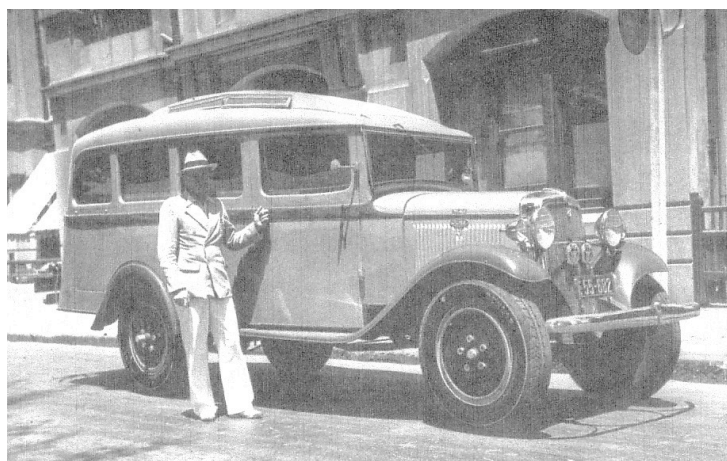
There were major delays and Frank, with backing from

Shell and Dunlop, decided on a second attempt to drive "Across the World to Australia" The Sundowner was shipped to England - Dinkum was left behind in the care of Lady Stonehaven - wife of the Gov. Gen. The story of that heroic expedition is long forgotten; it should be compulsory reading for every young Australian, a picture of achievement against immense odds and a triumph for sheer grit and determination.

The lure of gold - Lasseter's Lost Reef - Frank was a central figure in the aerial search which, with Aboriginal assistance, led to the discovery of Lasseter's body. Frank decided to try his luck at gold prospecting and in Arnhem Land he found promising indications. In 1933 he formed a mining company on the Sydney Stock Exchange - later, fearing his company would collapse, Frank fled to the bush life he loved - he fell seriously ill with Berri Berri - fortunately a wandering aborigine found him and nursed him back to health - shortly after his campsite was found by a plane sent to look for him

The pilot could not land so dropped him a note.

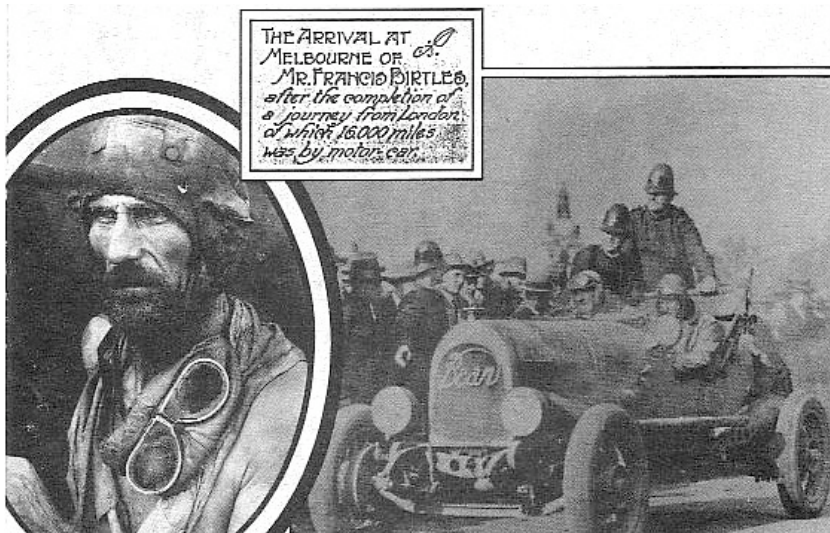
To Frank's amazement it was a letter from his brother-in-law, who he had left in charge of the mine - the mine had prospered - his shares had increased many times in value " I was a rich man, independent for life, I looked at my bedraggled person- and just couldn't



believe it - I just about broke down" Frank returned to Sydney, wedded Nea McCutcheon and settled in Beach St. Coogee

Frank bought an elaborately fitted out Ford V8 Caravan and a new Cinematographic camera and took off with Nea to show her much of the northern, central and western Australia he knew so well, but in more comfort than on his previous journeys !

Francis (Frank) Edwin Birtles -



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In 1941 Frank died from a coronary attack when visiting friends in Sydney – he is buried in the Anglican Section of Waverley Cemetery.

Frank left 10,000 glass slides of Aboriginal Life to the National Library. In his lifetime he wrote many articles and books such as -1906 "An Australian Trooper in Zululand" 1907-8 "All over Australia with bike and camera" 1909 "Lonely Lands- through the heart of Australia" – 1910 "Across Australia by camel pad and cattle track" – 1912 "Across Australia by Motor Car" – 1935 "Battle Fronts of the Outback"

Frank also made many films of his expeditions and of Aboriginal life
The "Sundowner" is on display at the National Museum – Canberra.



And now to catch dinner – Frank at the Alligator River with Dinkum and rifle –
Thanks to the National Library for many of these photos

