

## Rose Chalmers' Letters from MacDonald Downs, NT, 1973-75

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*Diane Bell<sup>2</sup>, in her important study of Aboriginal women at Warrabri Settlement in the 1970s, says, "I searched in all the likely places but have not been able to unearth any long-lost pastoralist diaries, missionary journals or campfire jottings [that] might deal with the families of Warrabri residents" (Bell 1993:42). As a contribution toward filling this serious gap in our knowledge of Northern Territory history, I have chosen to publish this expanded collection of letters written by Rose Chalmers at MacDonald Downs Station in the mid-1970s.*

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<sup>1</sup> Chalmers' letters compiled and edited in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, 1 December 2001; revised and reformatted in Franconia, New Hampshire, USA, 5 December 2012 and 23 January 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Bell, D. 1993. *Daughters of the Dreaming*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

## Introduction

I lived and worked with the Alyawarra Aborigines at MacDonald Downs Station, Northern Territory, Australia, from early May 1971 until the end of March 1972. Between April 1972 and the end of 1976 I lived in Seattle, Washington, USA, and exchanged many letters with Mrs. Rose Chalmers at MacDonald Downs, and sent things to her family and to the Alyawarra living there.

This document contains all of the letters from Rose Chalmers that I still have. Apparently I lost several of them, and I have no copies of the ones I sent to her. Such was the nature of communications back in the days before computers and email.

These letters say a great deal about what was happening to the Aboriginal people of Central Australia during the painful period of transition associated with the activities of the Aboriginal Land Claims Commission, and provide an intimate look at the effects the Aboriginal Land Claims Commission and all of its ancillary agencies and departments and activities had on the Chalmers family.

**Mac and Rose.** The division of labor between Mac and Rose Chalmers at MacDonald Downs was sharp.

Mac's parents homesteaded MacDonald Downs in 1923 when Mac was eight years old. He grew up with the Alyawarra, spoke their language fluently, was a fully initiated member of the language group, and handled the regular Sunday morning distribution of rations greatly augmented by items provided by the Chalmers' rather than the government. Nevertheless, he was busy running the cattle station from dawn until dark nearly every day so he was not present at the house on a regular basis. He said little to me (or to anyone else I suspect), but everything he said to me was important, positive, wise and supportive of the Alyawarra and of my research with them.

Rose grew up in South Australia, joined Mac in the Centre when she married him and was not fluent in the Alyawarra language. She was responsible for running their home, teaching their children, doing the paperwork associated with operating the cattle station, and handling all of the day to day aspects of Aboriginal welfare on the properties, especially with regard to health care, education and dealings with government agencies on behalf of the Alyawarra.

During my year at MacDonald Downs, I worked very closely with Rose and became well acquainted with her. She was as loquacious as Mac was taciturn. She provided most of the vital statistics in the data base, answered my questions about the Alyawarra with grace and clarity, became quite interested in my research as it progressed through the year and played a mean game of Scrabble. We had endless hours of open and serious discussions of Aboriginal health care, the incipient land rights movement, and education at the government schools at Utopia, Warrabri and Lake Nash.

She frequently visited all of the Aboriginal camps on all of the Chalmers' family properties to make sure she knew what was going on within the Aboriginal population, especially with regard to health. She spent a great deal of her own time and money on providing health care in the

camps and at the homestead, on bringing health care into the camps by the Royal Flying Doctor Service and the Visiting Sisters from the Health Department who were charged with monitoring and enhancing child health, and on transporting people to hospital in Alice Springs as needed even though the Alyawarra generally saw it as a place one went to die.

Consuming alcohol was a major problem in virtually every other Aboriginal population in Australia in the early 1970s, but by mutual agreement Mac, Rose and the Alyawarra totally banned its use in the camps on all of the Chalmers' properties. Making traditional carved wooden artifacts such as boomerangs and bullroarers for sale to tourist shops in Alice Springs and Adelaide was an important cultural and economic activity of the older Alyawarra men at MacDonald Downs, and Rose served as their sales agent so unscrupulous shopkeepers and wholesalers would not rip them off. Maintaining their sacred sites and their spiritual life were exceedingly important to Alyawarra men and women especially as they saw their traditions being destroyed elsewhere in the Centre, and the Chalmers assured them the security, the opportunity and the support they needed in that regard.

By the time I arrived at MacDonald Downs, Rose had known the Alyawarra intimately for decades. That gave her a multi-sided perspective on the Aboriginal people with whom she worked daily.

On the one hand she had enormous respect for their culture. She certainly didn't agree with all of their beliefs and activities, but she would – and frequently did - fight for their right to practice their culture as they saw fit. In her opinion and Mac's, the land occupied by MacDonald Downs and the many other properties within their domain was Alyawarra land, and she and Mac had a responsibility to repay the Alyawarra for their use of it. She did it by taking care of the Alyawarra to the very best of her ability, according to her own lights as to what was the best way to do it. In return, the Alyawarra took care of the Chalmers by openly accepting them, sharing their land and trusting them fully to serve as an essential buffer between the Alyawarra and the Australian government for whom the Alyawarra had no respect at all. The relationship between the Chalmers and the Alyawarra was in some sense symmetrical.

On the other hand, Rose felt free to laugh at the Alyawarra when they did things she considered to be silly or childish, and one of my strongest memories of my stay at MacDonald Downs is that the Alyawarra felt equally free to laugh at Rose and Mac and me whenever we did something they considered to be silly or childish. In this way too the relationship between the Alyawarra and the Chalmers was symmetrical.

**The Aboriginal Land Rights Movement.** Rose's letters to me present fragments of three years of the Aboriginal land rights movement in Central Australia from Rose's unique perspective, with Mac always just off stage expressing his opinions to me through Rose.

Without being pedantic and citing my sources, I can say without a shadow of a doubt that a good many whites in Central Australia – government employees, cattle station operators, businessmen in Alice Springs - got precisely what they deserved when the Aboriginal land rights / civil rights movement burst upon them. Early on, they and their predecessors advocated exterminating the Aborigines as the best way to handle cultural differences and did their best to achieve it. When

genocide failed, they advocated forced assimilation including the abduction of children from their families to “give them the benefits of civilization”. When that approach failed too, white government policy and popular opinion in urban Australia shifted toward “giving” the Aborigines the civil rights and land rights the European invaders had denied them for two centuries. In this climate, it is understandable that a lot of Aborigines and white “outside agitators” saw the Aboriginal rights movement of the 1970s as an opportunity to get a little revenge.

Unfortunately those who opt for revenge often hit the wrong targets. I grew up amidst the racial hatreds of Mississippi in the 1940s and 50s, watched the Black civil rights movement engulf the region in the 1960s, and later saw the American Indian and Inuit land claims movements unfold in the USA and Canada. In each case, I saw whites who were lifelong advocates of minority rights get tarred with the same brush that was used against the oppressors, simply because they were white and in the wrong place at the wrong time. Black and white civil rights workers who descended on Mississippi to rescue the blacks who lived there were totally incapable of distinguishing good Mississippi whites from bad ones, and in their own haste and bigotry they all too frequently classified all whites as bad and acted accordingly. They were supported sometimes by angry Mississippi blacks who were out to destroy everything in their way, but even the Mississippi blacks who knew the good whites from the bad and respected the good ones were powerless to do anything about the rampage of those seeking revenge.

Such was the fate of Mac and Rose Chalmers. Rose’s letters contain a great deal of data about Aboriginal births, deaths and population movements, rainfall and its impact on life in the Centre, and other topics that were especially important for my research. But those issues are secondary to her concerns about the pressures for change being applied to them by people who saw them as the enemy simply because they were white homesteaders, by people who did not know – and did not want to know – anything about the lifetime the Chalmers had spent in doing everything possible to support the Alyawarra.

Rose’s early letters to me discuss the political storm she sees on the horizon. She is not happy about that situation, but she is happy at MacDonald Downs with her husband and her Aboriginal people, and the clouds still seem far away. The pressures on the Chalmers intensify as the action moves out from Alice Springs and onto the cattle stations at Utopia Downs and MacDonald Downs. Rose becomes increasingly upset when faceless bureaucrats dismiss or challenge her sincere efforts to help the Alyawarra, when outsiders who know little about the realities of life in the region tell her she is fighting a losing battle and when an Aboriginal woman on her own power trip calls a press conference to castigate the Chalmers.

Finally, as conditions deteriorate ever more, Mac and Rose sell Utopia Station to the government so it can become an Aboriginal property administered by the government. The Chalmers do not object in any way to relinquishing the land to the Alyawarra for they considered it to belong to the Alyawarra all along. But they mightily resent having the government step in to do very poorly what the Chalmers had been doing very well for half a century, and thereby to do a grave disservice to the Alyawarra. Rose’s last letters are those of a woman pushed to the wall, furious, insulted, even lashing out at some of the Alyawarra whom she has somehow failed despite her best efforts. They are a scream of anguish and must be heard as such.

Genocide and forced assimilation were two great experiments in social engineering that Mac and Rose lived through and saw fail with horrible consequences in Central Australia. Has the third great experiment, the Aboriginal Land Rights movement, fared better? Are the Alyawarra truly better off now than they were in 1970? Was Rose needlessly concerned about the welfare of her people? She did her best. History must judge whether she was right.

**Fine Tuning the Record.** In November 2001, as I prepare this document, I am reading Diane Bell's *Daughters of the Dreaming* based on fieldwork begun in 1976 with Alyawarra, Walbri, Waramunga and Kaydej women at Warrabri Settlement. Despite its polemics, it is valuable to me for it enables me to see the private lives of Alyawarra women to which I had little access as a male anthropologist, and what I see through Bell's eyes rings true.

One of Bell's great laments is that she cannot find early diaries, collections of letters or similar materials written by women on cattle stations within 200-300 miles of Warrabri Settlement. This small collection from Rose Chalmers probably would not have been of great value to Bell for her requirements were quite specific, but I accept Bell's claim that similar documents or collections of documents are rare for Central Australia, and hope these letters can help fill the void. I trust Rose would agree with me on that point.

But I must take Bell to task for her treatment of the Chalmers family in *Daughters of the Dreaming*. Early in Chapter 2, Change and Continuity, she is angry about the treatment the Aboriginal people of Central Australia received from generations of whites, and reviews many of the genuine evils that befell the four major Aboriginal language groups represented at Warrabri Settlement in 1976. Apparently she could not find anything bad to say about the Chalmers family or MacDonald Downs Station for they are among the few cattle stations and families in the region whom she does not rake over the coals. But in her indignation, she never says anything good about the Chalmers' treatment of the Alyawarra. Rather she simply ignores them, standing the old adage on its head: "If you can't say something bad, don't say anything at all."

Furthermore, later in the same chapter, Bell contrasts the culturally detribalized Walbri living on the west side of Warrabri Settlement with the culturally intact Alyawarra living on the east side. She says: "If one tries hard and always faces east, it would be almost possible to collect sufficient data to write an ethnography of the 'traditional' life of the Alyawarra...". No doubt she is right, but she either does not know or fails to mention that one of the most important reasons that the Alyawarra still were culturally intact in 1976 was that the Chalmers family provided a safe haven for them for half a century.

For a general introduction to Mac and Rose Chalmers and the history of MacDonald Downs and adjacent stations, especially in the early years following homesteading in 1923, see Margaret Ford's *Beyond the Furthest Fences*<sup>3</sup>. It contains a good bit of information that Bell might have found useful but she does not cite it in her reference list.

**Transcription.** As I transcribed Rose's letters, I found a small number of problems. When I came to words that I could not decipher, I indicated them by ellipsis in the text. When I found

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<sup>3</sup> Ford, Margaret (1966) *Beyond the Furthest Fences*. London: Hoder and Stoughton.

words that were smudged or otherwise only marginally legible, I made my best guess at what they said based on contexts, relations among people she was discussing, etc. When I found words that Rose abbreviated, including the names of Aboriginal people and places, I spelled them out in full. I inserted explanatory remarks as needed within [brackets], but did not tamper with Rose's (parentheses). Finally I omitted a few items I consider to be extraneous, including some unnecessary redundancy between letters. But I never "sanitized" her writing – she said precisely what she wanted to say, and I have done nothing more than help her say it in her own way to a broader audience. So these are not exact copies of the originals, but rather are very lightly edited and enhanced versions of the ones still in my possession almost forty years after Rose wrote them.

**From Rose Chalmers, 9 April 1972**

MacDonald Station

It has been so long since I wrote I feel I should throw my hat on first. Did I thank you for those very interesting and valuable books you sent and also for the copy of your diary? If I haven't, may I offer our very belated thanks of appreciation. Alec has pored and pored over the book of earth photos taken from Apollo. And the diary was tremendously interesting aside from the several instances which would have been better omitted I feel. I hope that Alec will get around to finishing a letter to you soon. He starts and never gets beyond half a dozen lines. He enjoys the post cards, all showing a country vastly different from the Centre.

Our Centre at present is very dry indeed, or I should say the N.E. section of the Centre is. We have missed the rains. There have been floods everywhere, on the Queensland side coming in from Argadargada, and on the west to Bushy Park and parts of Alcoota. We are very disappointed of course, but we have had five good years so we must expect drought now. One is never ready for it though. We will just have to sell a lot of cattle, particularly cows and calves which are showing signs of weakness already.

Last week James O'Connell, anthropologist, arrived unexpectedly to do some work out here. His letter arrived after he did. He has made camp a mile out and each day has been going out with four boys to look at old camp sites. I think Dave Ruther, Sandy White, Billy Moss and one other are his guides. Yesterday he called in to say he was delighted with the help given. We only decided to let him stay when he said it would be for about 10 days. Mr. O'Connell seems a very serious, intense sort of man and I felt that he would bulldoze one down in his desire to get where he wanted. I don't know if he's afraid of me or not, but when he comes to the house he pulls up outside the little gate at the front (which we don't use) and sings out "Are you there Mrs. Chalmers?" No such thing as coming to the door. I think you mentioned this boy's name while you were here. Perhaps you have had contact with him?

At present many of our natives are living at Derry Downs. They seem to be gradually leaving the camp at Johnno's Bore and have asked for their own bore to be available as soon as possible. Old Jim Ross has become gardener up at Dnieper and has asked for his daughters (step-daughters) and Toby and Ada Smith to live there too for company. A great many Lake Nash and Warrabri people have been here, mainly at Derry, for ceremonies following the deaths of Murray Mills and Amy Ross. At one stage there were well over 200 people at Derry. Billy Timms, Billy Morton and the Willie Nothings are the latest to move down the creek. Nancy Mills had a girl last month but the child lived only 4 weeks. Nancy has now gone with her mother at Ammaroo. Dick is at the camp here at the house.

Jacob Jones' son Dan was initiated in Alice Springs late in February, with a Santa Theresa boy. The place - somewhere outside The Gap. I don't know why his ceremony was conducted so far from home. Four men from here went in with Jacob. Jacob has only just returned bringing his boy with him. Sammy Taylor and family have been here for some months but are moving on to Lake Nash this week. Thank goodness. Twice his eldest boy has broken into the store and taken money. I blame his convent education for that.

Arrangements have been finalized with Welfare for transfer of a piece of land and natives at Utopia. Welfare had almost bought Mount Skinner for them and then were told no one would be allowed to live on it. So that was that. We feel that an offer for Utopia may come at any time. \$100,000,000 has been allotted this year for Aboriginal Welfare and that will mean purchasing of properties. Murray Downs has been bought, also Mt. Ebenezer, ..., Ayers Rock and Willowra. When Welfare were here a week ago they asked whether we would ever consider selling MacDonald. Never!

Mr. Giese has been relieved of his position and Mr. MacHenry is now there. And gossip says Jack Cook of Alice will be the next to go.

The MacDonald people are not being worried by Welfare but Mac has been asked to speak to them and find out their wishes and thoughts for the future. Once they have some land the government will assist them with bores, buildings, etc. But no school "as they have made it plain they don't want one." Thank goodness someone has woken up at last. The MacDonald folk are very anxious for the land east of Kurrajong, west of Derry, north of Spinifex Bore. It is really unused by us, namely sand and spinifex with a few nice valleys. We just hesitate to make it over to them wondering just what will arise if we do.

Cattle work has begun again now the weather is cooler and everyone is happy to hear it. Bruce Chalmers took Marnie Norman, Johnny Jones, Freddy Jones with Toby Smith and his eldest son to muster his steers. Mac was relying on Brian Ross to be one of our main men, but Brian has just got married, so no sense out of him. It's a shame as he was good. His bride is Lily Lion. I think she is Lion's eldest daughter.

We have Janie Morton in the camp again, another young child I see and another on the way. Albert is at Lake Nash courting another wife we're told. Banjo Morton has now joined the line of folks from Derry coming for rations each week.

The Survey Sisters visit every 3 weeks now instead of every 6 weeks which is a bigger help to me but still not good enough. Last week blood tests were made on every person and also worm mixture administered to one and all. Alec spent the afternoon in the camp with the girls and said they pricked his finger, "but I wouldn't come at that awful worm stuff." We hope the clinic will be a going thing at Utopia within 6 months.

The teacher nominated to the school over there (Utopia) this year came down from Snake Bay outside Darwin and seemed sensible. His wife became ill and they had to move near a doctor. Now we have a young Scottish boy and wife waiting to move into Lissara College where he will be a handworks teacher, woodwork etc. Alister is the most sensible teacher we've seen yet and wish he could stay on. (Lissara College is not yet completed but all the staff are here waiting.) Last year he taught American children at Exmouth Gulf in Western Australia. He just deplors the school work set for native children. I hope that he can teach them some of his handcrafts, something useful.

Our new Labour Government is promising everything under the sun to the Aboriginals. One wonders where it will end. Some people are so disgusted that they have called meetings in Alice and Darwin too, under "Equal rights for Whites."

We have had a very hot summer this year and are glad that it is over and we can enjoy cooler days. This week there has been enough wind to blow us to Timbuctu, and plenty of dust with it. I guess the dust will continue to be worse until the rain comes. No display of flowers this year either, but then we seldom see what was here last year.

Charlie is home with us and operating the bulldozer. Both he and Jock have recently purchased motorbikes for cheaper running. Everyone is well, those down at Atula too. Next month our daughters and families are coming home for the Jubilee service on May 8<sup>th</sup>. My mother has just had four months in South Africa and is now on her way to England, planning to be back in Australia in early June.

Old Long Paddy and his whole family have disappeared to Lake Nash and we wonder if we have seen the last of them. I didn't know he had a daughter married to the tracker at Lake Nash. Paddy had a spell in hospital and came home much stronger, but he really is now quite frail. And I think William Lion is the same – he seldom comes into the station. And old Jim Austin too.

We continue to show films fortnightly with all the people gathering. Last month we counted 15 cars waiting outside the fence near the petrol. That was when the Lake Nash and Warrabri folk were here. Mac has had a second 1000 gallon fuel tank installed. We found they were using 1000 gallons every three weeks so the only way was to have a bigger supply.

I meant to say about the present teacher at Utopia: He wants to sack gardener Johnny Skinner, Dingo Johnny, for not doing his work, but we tell him he can't until Johnny pays back \$200 to Mac, borrowed to buy a car. So Alister is waiting patiently, hoping it won't be long. Mac lent the money only because of Johnny's having \$60 fortnightly, out of which he gives Mac \$30.

Five snakes were found in Jock's house since January. Gwen took fright and went off to Alice to stay only returning last week. Their new home is to be built in June.

Alec says cheerio to you. This is Tuesday and school is in, and he's plodding away with maths. I'm trying to learn the metric system and feeling very dull indeed. Governess Claire is on a station south of Alice this year.

Things go on in the same old way and I feel you would not find many changes.

We hope you are well. Once again our thanks.

Kindest regards,

Rose Chalmers

**From Rose Chalmers, 13 June 1972**

MacDonald Station

I apologize for being so long in answering your many interesting letters and saying thank you for your postcards and slides. What a different country [State of Washington, USA]. So beautiful, so soft, nothing of the hardness of our Centre. And yet at present our Centre is kind, gradually becoming covered with more and more flowers and grass still half green. It really is a treat to go driving.

We were most interested in all your remarks on the [Summer] School of Linguistics, its background activities, etc., and for your personal thoughts. We put Mr. Hansen off, told him we would contact him when needed. Some of the people thought it might be a good idea but all of them agreed that women were not the right teachers (as you suggested).

However, things in general with the Aborigines are now steaming up since the Gibbs Committee made their report 3 weeks ago. They advocate types of villages to be set up on properties, land to be made available for this, and the government to be in full control, the station people to be no longer responsible. The idea of villages (rather than grouped together in settlements) seems sensible to us but we don't like the government control, thinking of the types of staff we have seen elsewhere. I guess it will be a while before anything starts moving in our area but we know changes are coming. Mac and I are going to speak to the older men at next pension day telling them what is being advocated, so when the Welfare men do come around, their answer will be well thought out.

I visited the Welfare Department about that jolly teacher at Utopia. Mr. Cook, Assistant Director, told me he will be touring the area as soon as he can, summing up the position out here and discussing matters with us. I know they will be looking for pieces of land. He also told me Welfare now has two blocks of land in the main street and there they hope to open a shop which will sell artifacts, I think staffed by natives. This is a good move, and means I can get rid of my huge stock.

Mr. Townsend the teacher at Utopia has been a great worry to Jock and Gwen, taking so much outside the school into his own hands. I went across one Sunday and found Jock and Gwen upset over the standover attitude of this man. "He was going to report the policy on Utopia to Darwin." "Everyone he'd met had been against assimilation." "He wanted spray lines, showers and toilets erected in the camp – where should he write?" Etc, etc.

Well I put my head down and marched over to meet this man then and there. I was surprised to find quite a young boy, and everything in the world rosy! No worries or problems according to him. I brought up some of his remarks carefully and after listening for 10 minutes realized here was a man who was intent on changing the people at Utopia within a year. All my remarks about considering their laws, behavior, etc, were just airily brushed away with a wave of his hand. For instance, he has begun adult education and is giving two lessons at nights each week. The men came to the 1st lesson and some women to the 2nd – but no, that wouldn't do with him, they

must come together. When I protested their laws wouldn't permit sitting together, he just said "Rubbish – they have to forget all this." And do you know he went on to say "You and Mac Chalmers are fighting a losing battle over there, you must admit that." "Fighting a losing battle" I echoed. "We're winning, in our eyes." But I may as well have said nothing. It was all wasted. But I did go to Welfare and they said he had no authority outside the school room and someone would be over to speak with him. The only thing in his favor is the excellent garden he has made – not him, the school boys I should say. There is every kind of veg growing and all so healthy. Gwen says 4-5 boys work most of the day in it. Well, why doesn't he put all that energy and enthusiasm into digging up the whole school area. I told Welfare to bring a pair of hobbles and confine him.

More than half our people are present down at Derry enjoying the tremendous crop of berries, yams, etc. They report the biggest crop for a long, long time. Some don't even bother coming for weekly rations now. Dick and family, Slippery, Kingie, Frank Morton, Bob Nelson and Jupiter, Freddy, Ted Mills are there, and this week Jacob, Lenny and Johnny and families are going. The people out at your camp [Gurlanda] seem content to be there. Poor old Billy Moss still visits Delmore for engines or parts.

Billy Morton went to Alice for treatment of his bad eye but refused to go into hospital and went bush. Now he comes up each week for pain tabs and says there isn't any sight in his right eye. I can see the white skin over it. But if he won't go to hospital, what can be done. Dr. Whittenbury was to come out last week but was prevented. He is very interested in eyes. Lena Moss never produced a baby. When I went out so see they all looked at me and giggled and said "Nothing". Wallaby went to Alice to see a doctor and was away for a week. I have yet to find out if he went near the hospital.

Alfred Norman came out to Ammaroo from hospital, so Marnie and Tilly went down there and Marnie was given a job in the stock camp. They are now back with us. There was trouble in the stock camp (Slippery's son Sam was the trouble), and all the boys were going to walk off. They say Eric Coulthand doesn't try to understand the natives.

David Weir is having staff problems. Two of his boys – Barney's sons – left him to work permanently on Elkedra. He had to get Kingie and Lenny from us for his muster. Mac said he heard the boys say they don't get enough money on Derry, all the jobs are too short. The wages have just risen to \$40.50, so maybe the jobs there will be even shorter. We have boys shifting cattle on Mt. Swan at present, and 2 attending Holt's muster, and 3 over at Dnieper. Johnno has all his sons back with him and expects work for them too, but we can't give it. We finished our branding with 1900 calves, a record. On Utopia we gave the camp \$1.00 a calf and this made them find every calf. Their check was \$950, better than wages, and this did please them.

For the last 3 weeks, Mac, Alec and I have been camping on the Plenty at Mt. Swan. Mac is cutting posts for a holding paddock. We hope Dave and Kingie will dig holes and stand up the posts. We come down on Monday and go back Friday evening. The camp is right on the edge of the creek, with beautiful old gums all around and hundreds of birds. In the big gum over our tent are dozens of baby budgies. I think I could live here permanently, life is so peaceful. One could bear the end of the world. And yet we are happy to go home. When I see the bore and then the

camps and fires, I become to a certain extent excited. I think the people are glad to see us too, and know we haven't gone altogether.

Old Bill Ross was quite sick with a type of laryngitis, not being able to eat or drink, or even talk. Witch Doctor Sam was hastily brought over from Utopia, and they took out a quantity of seeds and leaves from his neck (somebody told Mac). When he still didn't recover, his arm was cut and he drank a cupful of blood and that did the trick. I meant to tell you too about Billy Morton. While in Alice a native doctor removed a handful of charcoal from his eye (Billy told us himself) – and nearly finished the eye off, I nearly added.

Mr. Urban sent out the [aerial] photographs and we are delighted with them. I suppose you have yours?

There was an uprising out at Papunya Settlement last month when one native was arrested for drinking and bringing drink in. This aroused all the others and things got well out of hand. They stormed the policemen's homes and threatened the families, throwing all kinds of things. A very nasty situation. I think 17 have been charged and serving sentences up to 3 and 4 years. We wonder if this is the beginning of such troubles. Station people on the west side [of the Stuart Highway] have taught wives to shoot – fancy me having to do this. Just unthinkable out here. And yet it could arise once these village are built and white staff in power. If only they would build the little towns and leave them, or simply leave them as they are.

The people have begun making their weapons again. Jacob has made some good spears and throwers, Johnny of course his never failing boomerangs and bullroarers. I haven't seen old ... for ages but not doubt he is up for his rations. Freddy has borrowed a Landrover to go dogging. Haven't seen how many scalps he has, but Sunday at Utopia I was sold 2 scalps – am happy to buy these. Dogs have been about in tremendous numbers. Mac got 5 one night from baiting. They are all swinging from a tree near here, plus another one Jock brought in.

Weather is cool, or cold, but no frosts yet and not really cold. Just beautiful. No more rain of course. We had a visit from two men at the Darwin meteorological bureau checking up on weather reporting – or rainfall reporting really. They would like us to do it regularly so I've promised them we will try and start next year. Charlie may like to take it on. He is still away, now basing way up north somewhere. We haven't seen him in two months.

Mac has allowed two Allen boys to shoot in the dam paddock (where there aren't any cattle). Kangaroo are in hundreds, thousands around here and Mt. Swan. The boys get up to 100 a night, and skins are \$2 in Queensland. Donald Holt also has shooters on Delmore.

School proceeds wonderfully well in the camp, maybe because there are no interruptions. It did Alec good in going to school at Deniliquin. He continues to read everything he can find.

Kindest Regards,

Rose Chalmers

PS: Did Joanna, Dave's 2nd wife, have her baby while you were here? When the Sisters came out there was no sign of it, so it must have died. It was not reported to me. I'm glad I hadn't registered it.

**From Rose Chalmers, 23 September 1972**

MacDonald Station

Thank you for your letters which came months ago and were meant to be answered long before this. We have had a very busy time one way and another, and letter writing has fallen off.

This winter has been one of the mildest on record, and far too little wind. Mac has had very little let up from keeping engines going [at the bores] for the last 3-4 months. We hope this means early rains this year.

The natives are already speaking of rainmaking which is unusually early for them. I don't think Long Paddy will see too much more of rainmaking for he has become very frail, although he still walks up for his rations each Sunday. I have never seen the new teeth worn – perhaps they only go in at night.

The people are still at Johnno's Bore but our group has increased considerably. We have Jacob, Marnie, Dick, Long Paddy, Dave Ross, Lenny, Kingie, Marnie Norman, George, Johnno, Jim Ross, Toby Smith and families, plus all the young men. Freddy Jones and Ted Mill continue to live at Derry. Frank Morton, Bob Nelson and Jupiter have gone back to Lake Nash following the death of Bob's baby. I had never seen the child, but it must have been two months old when they brought it up from Derry very sick. It died a few days later in hospital from meningitis. Following this the Survey Sisters came out and everyone on Utopia and MacDonald had to take 2 sulpha tabs. Now the whole Northern Territory is being done.

I think I told you of the new babies. Johnno and Angeline's in early April, Elsie Mills' in March, and Gloria, Dick's wife, had Lois early this month. At Utopia there were four babies in almost four weeks – more than my brain can cope with for naming.

We have Marnie Norman and a Sandy from Lake Nash on breaking in horses. They have handled 9 already and plan to send them to Utopia to work there. The stock boys have been kept busy over the last 2 months mustering cattle for trucking to Adelaide. At present they have 100 cows and calves in hand to go down to Cameron's, and then they start on the fat cattle again. We are trucking 3 weeks running in October, and that should be the end. The boys seem to take it in turn to go into camp, there are so many waiting for work and only 6 saddles.

We had a visit from Mr. Cooke and Earl Walter and their advice was that we make land available to the Aborigines as soon as possible. They went to both camps and spoke about schools and housing, etc. The men in this camp told them they didn't want anything changed at all, and out at Johnno's Bore, Jackie Diese and others spoke out "We are only bush people. You go away and leave us alone" as reported to Mac.

Well, for several weeks after there were many ... campfire discussions and then the men, in a body, approached Mac and I requesting that a letter be sent to someone in authority stating that no schools or changes be made on MacDonald. I wrote the letter and 54 put their thumbprints,

and it went off to Darwin. Sometime later Mr. Giese replied and thanked the people, but said he and several other officers from the {Welfare} Department would like to visit before Christmas to discuss the future of these people. And do you know were heard from Paul Albrecht that Earl Walter had queried that letter – wondered whether Mac and I had put the people up to it. I was furious.

The people here say that if they are to be given land it must be around Spinifex Bore, but why should they have to go and live in one spot when the land already belongs to them. They prefer to live in the 3 camps as now doing. I try to tell Welfare and others that our people are unique but no one listens. Everywhere else in Australia you hear of a great clamour for land rights, and yet here at MacDonald they already own it. However, a letter has gone to the Lands Department transferring 16 square miles around Spinifex Bore to them, but maybe no one will live there. I tell them they don't have to.

And also we are giving a piece on Utopia (3 miles south of the present camp) and hope the school will soon move. Paul Albrecht says there are all manner of hitches in transferring this land. He wrote months ago to Lands, and no reply yet. I don't think anyone really knows what's what yet, despite all the talking. We asked the Finke River Mission to take over the case of the Utopia folk, maintaining, etc., as it is getting too much for me, and we all met there a few weeks ago to discuss it. The mission are quite anxious to take it on and said they could do it in the New Year. When Mac and went to the camp to talk to the men, they protested vigorously about being fed by anyone else. Said wherever they have been the people are half starved – everyone got only a little bit of this and that – and please wouldn't we continue. So what do we do? I don't like to tell Paul Albrecht what they've said to us.

We asked Finke River in the first place to get in before Welfare did. The present teacher at the school is more than half mad and has the grandest schemes of what will be done (and the money he can make) when the school moves. We have twice asked to have him moved, but I think he has blinded Welfare with science. I've never met a creature like him.

No more ceremonies here since you left, but 3 weeks ago a large group from here went to Utopia for initiations. They hired our old truck to transport them. Dr. Whittenbury came out and examined bad eyes, and has a number lined up for the eye specialist – Billy Morton, Johnny Hunter, Johnny Crow, Alec Lee.

Artifacts still come in. We had to stop boomerangs as I couldn't move for them, and now I can't see for bullroarers. Alec gave up counting when he got to 126!

The x-ray unit was out last week and had 3 days here. The radiographer frightened the life out of the women and boys. He was such an unusual looking man with long, long hair and big brown eyes, and he wore a flat hat with two long red feathers (from the black cockatoo) sticking up. They just took off into the mulga and long grass and lay like lizards, thinking a kurdaitcha man had appeared. I had a big job locating them. I never did find Dave's two wives. When Steve the radiographer stood at the back door, my first thought was "Goodness gracious, here's Tiny Tim." His off-sider drove everywhere with a navy and white scarf tied across the lower part of his face (because of sore lips), so the pair were enough to frighten anyone.

The wildflowers have just finished. For five months they have been really glorious and one of the prettiest drives was out to your camp.

The Alice is to have TV in December, but doubtful whether it will be seen out here. We may not be missing much.

Charlie is still with the drilling rig, coming home to stay in December.

Much close now.

Our best regards,

Rose Chalmers

**From Rose Chalmers, 20 April 1973**

MacDonald Station

Last week I posted you a letter to you to your old address, and the same mail brought your album of very fine photos. I just wish you could have seen the excitement and heard the chatter when the book was shown to the men. They came from everywhere and every page was pored over and discussed fully. I only wish I knew what was said. They laughed and laughed and turned back pages for 2nd and 3rd looks, and came back later in the day for another viewing. I have taken a few photos of them which I'll send on if they come out.

This is Good Friday, and a cool fresh wind today, a bit overcast too, and I feel the summer must be over now.

Later on this morning, Alec and I are driving to Mud Tank to meet an American family. We are having their son Joey, about Alec's age, for Easter. He is a keen collector of lizards so I have instructed the lubras to bring in what they can and especially a mountain devil.

Jim O'Connell left us last Friday. I think he hopes to return to work in a cave near Johnno's Bore. He had an episode of ptomaine poisoning when they were on the Sandover one day. This really upset him but everyone recovered. A tin of ham was blamed.

About Jim coming back, maybe for 6 months. We wish we knew how you felt about this. I'm not sure we should give him the OK to go ahead. I think the natives have some reservations too, although they did indicate they wanted him to dig. At least some did.

Carmel had a week with us and was feeling miserable all the time, and now her condition has been diagnosed as hepatitis. Gwen came over yesterday with injections for all of us, so we hope that will save us. What if it comes into the camps? I hate to think of that.

Carmel's house girl Julie (you may have seen her at Atula) is in hospital with twins, and great excitement for all.

I do hope my other letter arrives safely. I have given all the news in that one.

Kindest regards,

Rose Chalmers

**From Rose Chalmers, 22 August 1973**

MacDonald Station

The arrival of your card to Alec last week reminded me of the letter I owe you. And the arrival of Jim and Lorry O'Connell on Tuesday spurred me on further.

Jim tells us your work is printed and we must congratulate you on your degree. I'm sure nothing was more earned and hope it will mean all kinds of good things for your future. Mother is here with us at present and is very interested to hear all this.

By the way, Lorry mentioned reading your journal and how she enjoyed it, but I am curious to know where she got it as I thought we (and your people) were the only ones to have access to it. However, that is by the way. [Answer: At AIAS].

Jim was to camp over at Johnno's but most people must be here for I see them working down at the camp. At least Lorry is there. Perhaps this is just a preliminary before they start digging. Lorry appears full of enthusiasm for everything and wants to set the world on fire in a matter of a few weeks. They mentioned 6 weeks as being their length of stay but no doubt that depends on how they will get on.

Barney Morton (from Derry) died suddenly at the Harts Range Races 3 weeks ago and caused a great upset among the folk. Everyone has moved from Derry, most are here, except his sons who went to Warrabri. Old Jenny Hunter died two weeks back and that has brought some folk into this camp. Mac has promised to open up Spinifex Bore for them and has all the equipment ready, and only needs the time. People seem very anxious to move out, especially as David Wier had hunted a number of families away from his place the week before Barney died. Old Jim Ross and family, Toby and family, plus young Joe Ross and one or two other young men continue to live at Dnieper.

Mary Morton has a new babe, Paul, born on 2nd July. Dorothy Jones had Peter on 19th May. Nancy Mills had Margaret on 20th February and it died a month later.

We had a very dry year up until early June (no really good rain for 15 months) when 2 inches fell. Wildflowers are coming out but there will be nothing like last year's display. Since June unsettled weather comes on every 2-3 weeks with south of Alice benefiting most. Twice Mac has started stock boys off branding, and after a few days have had to knock off because of rain.

In July we had 3 weeks in Queensland, driving to Mt. Isa and leaving our car there, and taking the train to Townsville. We intended going north to Cairns but not enough time to see such a huge area, so went to Brisbane for 6 days then traveled back to Mt. Isa by bus. Queensland is so big, and it takes days to go across it. We enjoyed different scenery from here – tall trees, big rivers, and lovely, showy shrubs and creepers. Coming back to Isa, Mac was interested in seeing again the route they traveled over long ago with their sheep and cattle. All of Queensland is

covered in beautiful feed, but to us the best country of all was Avon Downs and Soudan Stations west of Camooweal. Beautifully grassed plains and scattering of trees.

The new house at Utopia has just been completed and painters are at work. Jock and Gwen are lucky to have such a fine home, fully air conditioned and a solar heater.

The native folk at Utopia were preparing to move onto the piece of land we had made available to them, 3 bores had been sunk by the government and a clinic was to be erected before Christmas. Two weeks ago a half-caste fellow stating he was from the Aboriginal Advancement League arrived and started making trouble. He said a station was needed for the blacks, not a measly bit of ground, etc, etc. I was over there and told him what I thought. Then he threatened to bring in Charlie Perkins and how would I like to have the trouble HE would start up? Anyway, all the ground work done by us and Welfare is now tossed aside, and negotiations for Mt. Skinner are in progress. In one way, as Mac said, perhaps it would be for the best to have them taken right away, especially when such creatures as that Merv Torres (a backyard brawler he is called) is allowed to come in. I am writing to Mr. McHenry in Darwin about this incident and rudeness, and asking what protection we have. I can see him appearing on MacDonald Downs next, I mean this Torres fellow. There seem to be so many different departments now, all paid by the government but pulling in different warp.

This is Saturday and I must get mail finished.

Marnie Norman returned from Lake Nash yesterday (he has been head stockman for 3 months) and says people are discussing what land they want at Lake Nash. I think it will be only a matter of time before these here will be pushed into deciding too. We have already had visits from men of Aboriginal Affairs (there is an office in Alice, distinct from Welfare) and I think there will be many more. If only Barney Morton were here to speak out for the people – he was afraid of no one, and let them know it.

We are to have the radio telephone installed in October and hope it will warrant the outlay each year.

Survey Sisters visit every 3 weeks which is an improvement. This trip consists of Utopia, Ammaroo, Derry and MacDonald. People have been free of much sickness this winter, except for the babies (especially Lenny's) who are in and out of hospital like yoyos. Today Topsy is taking in Joyce on the mail plane.

Poor old Long Paddy becomes weaker but visits Harts Range and Alice now and then so it is hard to keep track of him. Bob Austin is courting someone at Derry (or was). He is not our head stockman now (because of this), and Johnno or Brian has taken his place.

We are to start fencing the boundary between Weir's and Kurrajong – Dave and King are waiting to go. Lenny has been almost fully employed since April, a most reliable and conscientious worker, repairing fences, oiling mills, repair work on Utopia – in fact every kind of job.

The people are not bringing so many artifacts in lately. At Utopia they have started producing coolamons decorated with burnt poker work – that made-up stuff you see everywhere in Alice. I'm worried on every side (in Alice) for things but just can't get the folk to hurry on.

Will have to leave this now. Sorry it is still not the long letter I want to write. We think of you and the people ask after you too.

Kindest regards from us all,

Rose Chalmers

**From Rose Chalmers, 16 November 1973**

MacDonald Station

Months slip past and soon Christmas will be here. Alec is about to finish his correspondence lessons and I'm happy, for I feel weary of constant teaching. But we will miss him next year.

We did enjoy Jim and Lorry and look forward to having them next year. They seem to have fitted in with the people as well as you did. We saw quite a bit of Jim, but Lorry always seemed to be out or with the women, and no time to spare for any visiting. I think when they return in March they will live out at the other camp, or wherever the people at the house have moved to.

The Summer School of Linguistics people are anxious to place 2 women here at MacDonald but we are refusing. The girls had two months at Murray Downs, then a few months at Lake Nash, and now say they must come here to finish the language.

We have had a very upsetting time with natives at Utopia. A half caste woman born at Utopia 34 years ago suddenly returned this year and was quietly agitating in the camp without our knowledge. Suddenly the Central Australian Legal Aid Service (newly formed) was on us for failure to pay right wages, lack of right goods, and even stealing of pension money. And to crown it all they also asked us to hand over the station to the Aboriginal people. It was really horrible, just like a nightmare.

However, the Welfare Department (now Department of Aboriginal Affairs) was right behind us, supported us all the way, made that wretched Legal Aid take back everything. However, that woman had called a press conference, with her step-father and uncles (all the worst types on Utopia) and said the people on the station were starving, etc, etc. This went all over Australia. Mac and I went to Alice in a fury when we heard this on the National News, and called our own press conference and gave them the truth. But of course our words didn't get headline news like hers did. I might add that about 80 people at Utopia were loyal to us and refused to have anything to do with Barbara Torres.

She took her lot out to a waterhole and has been trying to get the government to equip one of our vacant bores. They are now going ahead with the 3 miles of country on the south end of the station, and early in the New Year the camp should be moving onto it. Last week architects came out to ASK what kind of homes the people wanted. It seems that they can have anything, \$30,000 being the ceiling price! Are we madder than ever. Mac and I are wondering if we should be getting out of the Northern Territory because of the way things are developing. All maintenance [rationing] is to cease at Christmas, so a lot of men will have to claim unemployment benefits.

Next week is the 2nd Land Rights meeting in Alice, and Johnno Clark and Albert Morton will be joining in. They have been sent maps and have been asked to mark in land they want and bring it to the meeting. Johnno (and Albert too) wants all of Ammaroo which really doesn't seem fair. Ammaroo has recently been bought by a Mr. Simpson.

There have been many meetings on Ammaroo recently by people from here, Warrabi and Lake Nash, all to do with Barney's death. I think everyone returns tomorrow, and then the ceremony of the grave filling will be carried out.

Quite a few families seem to be living permanently on Ammaroo now – they say the new owners are very kind to them. They still come fortnightly for rations.

Jacob Jones and Lenny, also Dave Ruther, have done a lot of fencing this year. We now have a number of small paddocks on Mt. Swan. Lenny is more or less permanently employed, a most useful boy. Poor fellow always has 1 child in hospital; they are never all well together. When the clinic is built at Utopia, someone will be calling weekly.

The Centre continues to have lush growth except for our area. Rain has been very patchy indeed. Alice Springs itself has had green feed for months and months, rain falling every two or three weeks. A most unusual year.

We will be off to the seaside again in January - a big family gathering, this time for Mother's 80th birthday. Annette, our eldest, and family are to arrive in Alice any day. They have bought a business in the town and are thrilled to be coming back.

Poor old Billy Moss seems to be aging fast, and I notice has a bad back. Old William Lion is still quite sprightly, but old Jim Austin is becoming feeble and doesn't come in so often. That half caste woman is a granddaughter of old Jim's – his eldest daughter. Minnie is her mother. She told me Lottie was attacked by a kurdaitcha and both her legs were broken "the same as is done to a kangaroo before cooking". We don't know whether to believe her or not, but will ask Jim Ross about it.

Everyone is asking about Christmas so we will soon have to be thinking of it. Since Utopia trouble [began] I have hardly written a letter or attended to anything. Mac and I have never been so downhearted before.

By the way, in Jim's last letter (he sent all the maps with sacred sites marked for all the groups) he mentioned he'd had a letter from a lawyer connected with Aboriginal Legal Aid (not the Alice Springs Legal Aid Department) requesting all available information on traditional Aboriginal land tenure within the limits of Utopia Station. We wonder why. He will be present at the Land Rights meeting next week.

Kindest regards,

Rose Chalmers

**From Rose Chalmers, 15 February 1974**

MacDonald Station

Would you care for a little rain over there? We've had 20 inches for the first five weeks of the New Year, another 81 points again last night. This rain is likened to the 1910 and 1921 years which of course the Chalmers never saw.

Are you planning to return to Australia some time? We expect to hear from Jim that he will be coming back in March. My goodness, he won't know the country. It's like a paradise, cattle hidden in long grass, roads overgrown and bush tucker everywhere. I wish you could see it. Mary Morton and her girls bring me in billycans of blackberries, langwas, yams, etc. The Sandover and Bunday Creeks are still running – both were tremendous floods, overflowing their banks all along the way.

Dick Mills and family were caught at Utopia and still haven't returned. Only yesterday did Slippery, Ted, Johnno, Billy Timms and Marnie get up from Ammaroo. Food has been dropped every week. We expected more on Friday but nothing came. Maybe the Department thinks everyone is moving again. We have no hope of getting our truck into Alice until the road has been done up. It's just a shambles.

Now I must thank you for the 2 lovely books received last week. I am particularly interested in the one on wheat growing ... and everyone enjoys the beautiful pictures in the other book. Everyone has had much time with the yoyo you sent to Alec. Charlie seems to be the master, much to Alec's disgust. Alec thought he was writing to thank you ... but he seems to be always too busy, now he has settled in school in Alice and is caught up with various activities. Mac and I think he looks tired, but I guess he will take it all in stride.

Did [your] papers mention the floods in Australia? It was a very bad time for thousands of people, many still homeless, and with tremendous stock losses. And where was our Prime Minister through all this? Bowing and scraping to the Chinese. The natives are very frightened of the big rains. Everyone is camped on the hill behind the house and all blame the comet. Sandy and Billy Morton are now at the house telling me plenty more rain coming and do we have any camp sheets left? Not one I'm afraid.

After Billy Moss's death, Alec Lee and his wives and mother-in-law moved to Utopia with old Rosie [Billy's widow] and now say they will stay there. We feel the half caste woman is manipulating them (Alec is her relation). The more she has on her side, the more power she will have.

We are still being worried by various half castes. Charlie Perkins wants us to give 200 miles of Utopia, Milton Liddle wants the whole station, and Barbara Torres says her people will be content with 5 or 6 miles on the western side (this is as well as the 4 miles given previously). We are very tempted to sell the place just to get some peace, then Mac says "Why should we be hunted off the place, especially when we know they would only make a mess of running it." As

has already happened with other properties bought. A Welfare officer is now stationed at Utopia. He is to run a store (the maintenance has ceased) and look after pensions, unemployment benefits, etc., We are not very happy about all the men, especially the young ones, receiving unemployment money.

I have been re-reading your diary and thoroughly enjoying it all. Already those days seem long ago and I long for the peace we knew then.

The new owners of Ammaroo, Simpsons, are very tolerant to all Aborigines so that many are making their home there. Once our maintenance ceases I feel we will rarely see Slippery, Ted, etc. Their cheques will go to Ammaroo. Marnie Norman returned from Lake Nash with a young 2nd wife. I haven't seen her or heard her name yet. He has been working on Derry Downs with some of our stock boys, but they walked up yesterday and will be on to stock work here as soon as the country dries out. David's on boys should be allowed to return now. The excuse before was not a big enough rain to wash Barney's tracks away. I think Jerry has taken a 3rd wife, Gipsy's younger sister Mary. I'm cross about that. Wallaby Moss is living at Utopia too – all are over there, I suppose staying. The government says the clinic will be erected by April but we doubt it.

Alec and I went down to Port Lincoln in January (missed all the rain) and with all my brothers and sisters celebrated my Mother's 80th birthday. We set out on the train, got as far as Finke, had a day and night there, and returned to Alice [due to flooding]. That was January 13th and no train has run since then. Trucks are bringing food up. You can imagine how everyone feels about the railways and all demanding an all weather road to Adelaide. Our summer was dreadfully trying before the weather broke – great humidity for weeks and weeks. I was glad to escape to the sea.

Annette and her family are now settled in Alice and Alec boards with them. Everyone is well – Cameron, Carmel, Jock and Gwen. All were caught in the Alice during the rain, and 3 weeks before the boys could get out. They nearly went mad. The Todd has been running for 40 days and is still going.

Our kindest regards,

Rose and Mac Chalmers

PS: Wally Clarke has married Katie Morton's daughter – is it Hazel or Janice – the eldest. Last week the natives found a large patch of watermelons at the old camp, just away from your camp site. The brought in 12 huge melons. Delicious.

**From Rose Chalmers, 17 June 1974**

MacDonald Station

Thank goodness the rain ended in May. We all had webbed feet as it was, and the poor natives were simply fed up with it all, not being able to get about.

I guess Jim keeps you posted with the news of our camp. He seems very happy and getting on famously and has thoroughly enjoyed having Len what's-his-name. We found Len a most interesting person.

Yes, things are changing indeed. We go about our work hoping nothing too drastic is going to upset our small peaceful world. It seems as though nothing can be done (by us) to keep us all out of it. Even the natives don't know what is happening. Three of the men are now receiving the Sitting Down Money (as the Utopia people call it – Barbara Torres was responsible). Jacob, Marnie Lewis and Dick Mills, and claims have gone in for Billy Morton and Dave Ruther. A form has come back for Billy to fill in: "What efforts have you made to find work since working in 1941?" Well – what will Billy say to that?

Poor Mary is simply fading away, and Billy has confided to Mac that a bone could have been pointed at her. Several months ago Mary went to hospital for investigation but nothing was found.

I'll be glad when they get out to Spinifex Bore amongst the wealth of bush tucker.

I meant to say before that the maintenance of MacDonald Downs is to cease before long. That is why we're claiming unemployment benefits for some of the men.

Not 1 car is going in the camp at present. We have never known such a lean time. Jim's presence (with the Toyota) saves them all. The Utopia natives are having a lean time – all living on the pensions and endowments, and coming across here when they become too hungry. The government is so slow at setting up their village and store.

We had a few weeks in Adelaide last month and welcomed the change from black faces. The radio telephone is now installed and being very useful. At least we can have a private conversation.

The country is blooming, everything golden at present with drifts of bluebells everywhere. And snow flowers among the mulgas showing themselves this week. It is all so beautiful. I'm reveling in having no ties this year, and going out everyday with Mac. I'm never home, life is one long holiday and I wouldn't change places with anyone.

Wildlife are numerous. Kangaroos are seen within half a mile of the house in every direction. And yet Dave walked out to Tower Rock and shot a wallaroo.

Boys have been branding and are starting again next week. So much rain has made water all over the place and cattle are very scattered and hard to find. The men are making very few artifacts – at least I see few, but they could be making things for Jim. The shops in Alice have given up asking me.

Lenny's Topsy had her 4th child, a boy. The Sisters think it could be a half caste and I'm sorry if it is. Most likely happened when Topsy was in Alice for some time last year with the babe in the hospital. Lenny was asked to take her home because she was "playing up." Poor Lenny.

Will close now with our kindest regards,

Rose and Mac Chalmers

**From Rose Chalmers, 6 March 1975**

MacDonald Station

Just a note in reply to your letter received last week. We hope that you can come out to join Jim in his 3 months work at Johnno's Bore. We would be very pleased to see you again, and I know the people on the hill feel the same.

You would see the country at its best. Everything is flowering, a sheer delight. We can hardly believe our good fortune in having so many excellent seasons.

Looking forward to seeing you (we hope).

Kindest regards,

Rose Chalmers

**From Rose Chalmers, 15 June 1975**

MacDonald Station

Thank you for your letters and papers. We are always pleased to read your articles and of course glad to have your letters.

Jim and helpers arrived on Friday and I guess have set up camp. I think the very cold conditions have surprised them all. The nights, and winds, have been below freezing – years since it has been as bad as this. Its 10 am before any natives appear, and then the look like walking tents. The Sisters set up their clinic at 9 and the first to appear came at 10:30. This morning in Alice the pipes were frozen and poor gardens just blackened.

Jim went back into Alice yesterday taking Long Paddy, Angeline and Maggie their daughter. Paddy is slowly becoming weaker and seems to be constantly upset in the stomach, so Angeline asked that he go to hospital for a while. And Maggie will have a chest x-ray for her persistent cough. Next trip Jacob is to go for investigation of a lump in his side. We thought he and another older man would volunteer to help with [Jim's] work, but no, they have put on younger men, Dick's [Mills] boy Ronnie and Bill [Ross's] son Henry, two that weren't getting Sitting Down Money. I wonder was there a reason for this? They are not camping out there but are being picked up each morning and then returned.

Half the people have moved down to the old camp at the stock bore, a much warmer site. Old Jim Austin and family, Johnny Hunter, Lenny, Jacob, Marnie Lewis and Long Paddy's mob are still on the hill. Jim Ross seems to be back here permanently. We have Andy Ross and family, Dave's brother, here and I think they will stay. Far better here than forever drinking and fighting in town. Hardly anyone goes to Alice now, and a very good thing. Every time there is a Legal Aid meeting, or Land Rights, someone is killed or put into hospital. Our people want no more to do with any meeting and asked me to write for this, but I haven't. Those in Alice would say we were only putting them up to it.

We offered Utopia to the government months ago and they are still deciding what to do. I think our government has almost run out of funds, or soon will be out of pocket. The new school set up at Ti Tree is costing \$2 million, and that will be for approximately 150 children. And it won't do them any good at all. The Utopia school is closed this year. Too much maintenance work to be done on the caravans and power plant. Builders have started working on the village site, a store being erected first. We are very sorry the man in charge is an alcoholic. Four Aborigines from Utopia are being employed at some colossal sum.

The Billy Morton family are still on the hill. Billy gets good pay from unemployment benefits. Katie's daughter Janice married Johnno's son Wally and they have a baby mostly reared by the granny it seems. Janice is so young.

Now that everyone is receiving money, not so many artifacts are made. I almost have to beg the men to make them. Last week a letter came from Darwin for 100 bullroarers. I may be able to

supply 20. Johnny Hunter still plods along at something, and Sandy [White] and Marnie [Lewis] will produce a few boomerangs.

Kangaroos are fat and can be got quite close in and there has been a wealth of bush tucker earlier but all going off now. This is a dry winter compared with last year. The country is more heavily grassed than ever seen, and people are preparing now against summer fires. Charlie has a program of fire breaks with the grader, and fire fighting gear has been ordered.

The people here are still waiting for their truck. Jim Ross has been holding papers for 3 months waiting for the Patrol Officer to call and fill them in. He lodged the application so we're letting him handle it all through. But how do we get the officer here? I've written and sent messages. He gets as far as Utopia then hurries back.

I hear that a site has been chose for the village for Ammaroo / Lake Nash folk a few miles north of Ammaroo house. Goodness knows when the work will start.

The beef industry in Australia is still in the doldrums and no improvement in sight. The government doesn't seem to offer any real help, as in freight costs, our biggest item. The railways raised their costs 50%, a real blow. We pay well over \$30 now to sell a beast, sometimes making \$12-15 profit. Native wages have gone up to \$80. We hear that some stations won't be doing any branding because of these wages. Our team will have to be cut to 4.

Alec is in St. Philips College this year, in Alice, and getting on well in school. When he was on holidays at Christmas, he found a book "Learn Latin in Six Months" and bought it, and took it to the college saying "Someone might teach me." But no one there would do it. Now we're hoping to find someone to teach him another language, maybe Indonesian. He really is eager, and talks of Greek later. A small boy's fancies. The folk down at Atula are fine and so are the ones at Utopia. Mac and I had 3 weeks in Western Australia with Heather last month. That is a very nice State.

We haven't met any of Jim's team yet. I hear there is an elderly woman in the camp. Hope the poor thing has a good swag.

Jehovah's Witness men (3 of them) called on Sunday and spent a few hours in the camp. I think they quite alarmed some of the people with their talk of the end of the world near. They asked Mac who they were. I think Mac was at a bit of a loss to explain. I just said "Little bit silly". They found Dave Ross "a fine fellow, and hope to see him again."

About returning next year. We have to say that no one will be [conducting research] on MacDonald in 1976. We understand that Jim is to finish in September this year. After that project, that's that. We were happy for you to join him this winter but that was not to be. We certainly won't be giving Jim permission to come back. Later on, when our people are in a permanent camp at Utopia where they have chosen a site, then maybe we will be ready to discuss things. I'm surprised to hear that Jim plans to continue work next year. We'll have to make it clear soon, the situation. We will all be pleased to see you back one day, and I hope you appreciate our feelings about next year.

Senator Cavenagh, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, has been sacked, with others, and a Mr. Johnson whom we hadn't heard of is in his place. Charlie Perkins continues to be a thorn in everyone's flesh and becomes more disliked by all every week. He is now applauding the visit of Mohammed Ali and hopes to bring him to the Alice to talk to the people. If Charlie only knew what people, black and white, really thought of him.

With kindest regards,

Rose Chalmers

**From Rose Chalmers, December 1975**

[Christmas Letter to family and friends]

MacDonald Station

Christmas again and the only way we know is because the natives are corroborating and the wild oranges are flowering. Such beautiful flowers this year. Otherwise we live in a smoke filled world with one day exactly like another, men out fire fighting and the country becoming more and more blackened. What we dreaded has come to pass. So much rain last year covered the country in such growth as has never been seen before.

Fires had broken out earlier in the year but the men had quickly dealt with them or rain came at the right moment.

Cameron and Charlie have graded hundreds of miles of fire breaks here and on Utopia and each time thought the fire was controlled but strong gusts of wind carried burning tussocks across. One night Mac and I drove away out into our sandhill and spinifex country to the north, where the fire began, and from a hill the whole area in front of us was like a town lit up. There were just hundreds of fires as far as we could see, a frightening sight really.

All of Utopia is now burnt and on MacDonald the country west of Bunday Creek has gone. Roughly 800 sq. miles in all. We take consolation in the thought of nice new green grass and forget the miles and miles of fencing to do.

Because of the slump in the cattle industry everyone is badly overstocked and watering has become a great problem. We should have sold half of our cattle but like others did not want to give them away. Especially when they are in such prime condition. We found a market paying good prices in Cloncurry, Queensland, late this year and sold 100 but the distance is so great and also rain bogged the trucks down half way there so that they were two weeks on the road. And then 11 died.

We have sold Utopia to the Government for the Aboriginal people and look forward to being finished with it at the end of the year. Utopia is a beautiful property but has many, many problems with the natives and these will only increase not lessen.

At present all the cattle are being bang tailed and cross branded, a big job. They expect over 3,000 cattle to be done. The men are in their 5th week now, a team of eight plus three from neighbouring Mt. Skinner Station.

We are allowed to take off all the male cattle over 18 months and these Charlie carts to Alice Springs for trucking to Adelaide. The Government has bought the others.

What has happened over the last 12 months? I say almost nothing. In May we enjoyed a few weeks in Western Australia with Heather and Sam. The West is next best to the Northern

Territory. Maybe in a few years we'll say the best, if the natives continue to be pampered and made fools of, as they are now. So much money poured out to them and not a thing done to earn it.

This week at Utopia prospective managers are being interviewed. The blacks have the final say. We are just disgusted. How could Dingo Johnny (a no-hoper himself) and others choose the right man? Do they look at his teeth and boots or does the one with the flashest elastic sides and cowboy hat get the job? And the poor fellow will be sacked by them if he doesn't please them. They have just sacked the builder because he wasn't working fast enough (what a laugh, knowing how fast they work).

Summer came in early this year, far hotter than normal. We were sleeping out early in October. It is pleasant under the stars listening to the sounds of singing and boomerangs clicking on the other side of the hill. Initiation ceremonies have been held since October. They are on the last victim now. He was missing when the men went to 'catch' him one night (I don't blame him) but of course was soon found. No boy escapes this deed. His mother, Gloria, had a babe after the 1st night of dancing, a little 4 pound mite, and when the sisters visited they wanted to take the two of them to hospital but Gloria wasn't allowed, she is the star performer, has to dance all night, five nights in a row. Poor thing. Do you know of any other mothers with new babies who dance all night?

Alec is home early for holidays this year. He has enjoyed his 1st year at St. Philips College in Alice and has a fine school report. It is good for us to have a young person in the house again.

Poor Mac is continually pumping water over a large area and must travel almost 200 miles daily keeping engines going. I just see him as he goes past each day, calling in for late breakfasts or lunches and coming home well after dark. He looks forward to an easier life in a few weeks, when Utopia is taken over.

Jock and Gwen are proud parents of a boy, now 3 weeks old. Jamie McLeod brought great rejoicing after 3 daughters and with their move to a nice home in Alice Springs, Jock and Gwen couldn't be happier.

There was a great fight in the camp this week. Mary came screaming down from the camp, followed by her daughters, that Dick had killed her. Alec and I rushed out and there she was covered in blood and bits of flesh hanging from her face and forehead. Hard on her heels was Mollie (?) claiming that Mary had killed her brother, Louis. We found medicines and bandages for all and tried to clean up poor Mary. All she would say was "You ring up the police Mrs. Chalmers. Thank you Mrs. Chalmers. We fixem up that wild mob up there." An hour later poor Louis struggled to the back door covered in blood and a large hole in the back of his head, still oozing. I could hardly bear to look at it. Mary had hit him with a piece of wood with nails in it. He was a mess. Anyway, Alec and I tore up sheets and wrapped and wrapped that head till it was three times its size. At 10 p.m. when Mac was home, old Jimmy loomed up out of the darkness by our beds saying that they couldn't stop the bleeding on Louis (you see I've never been any good as a nurse). We went in and made a great wad of gauze and oil and told jimmy to plug up the hole using the rest of the sheeting. We half expected him to die, but in the morning all was

quiet, no weeping and wailing and we haven't seen them since. That was yesterday. I've always heard that blacks have heads of stone. Now I know.

Long Paddy continues to make rain, despite his great age. He made too much in October and it was a great interference to the corroborees. The men were becoming very angry with him, if he can make it surely he could stop it. Paddy told Mac he was doing everything possible (I would like to have asked what that was) but there must have been a kurdaitcha man somewhere. However, on the last, important day when nothing must interfere with ceremonies the clouds miraculously cleared and Paddy emerged beaming from his wurley. He was once again the all powerful man.

Kindest regards,

Rose Chalmers

PS: We have had rain and more rain, 464 points in 24 hours and it is still coming in. All the natives are about to move out to Spinifex Bore where the government is putting in a pump. Old Jimmy Ross, Alec Lee, Long Paddy and Andy are going to Dnieper. Bruce Chalmers now runs quite a large store with petrol which attracts them. They were promised a truck long ago but it still hasn't appeared. They need it to come in each week for their rations. We hope for more sense and not so much silly spending in our country now there's a change in Government.

**From Carmel Chalmers, 25 August 2004**

Dear Woody,

We lost Mac last month. He died of pneumonia after a short illness and was buried at Tower Rock alongside Rose on July 16th. He was alert right up until the end and enjoyed a constant stream of visitors throughout his 6 months in the Old Timers Home in Alice Springs.

I thought you might like to see a couple of photos taken at the funeral. They will bring back memories.

In the one showing the pallbearers, those you can see and may be able to identify are (from the back of the procession) Mary Morton, Billy's wife, in the yellow jumper. She was very distressed and insisted on walking in the procession. Afterwards, she then waited until last as they all filed past and shook hands with the family, and she hugged each one of us with tears streaming down her face!) She is following close behind members of the family: Annette, Heather (not visible), Cameron is the gray-headed one, the really tall one is Alec, then our son Callum, and Charlie. Rose's sister's son Neil played the pipes. Heather's son Cameron, Charlie's son Malcolm and Jock's son Jamie were pallbearers on the other side, out of sight. The Alyawarra women from MacDonald are all standing along the back and the men were all positioned closer to the gravesite.

I am also attaching a letter dictated by Lenny Jones and read out at the funeral. You will no doubt notice some spelling errors in the Aboriginal names. I copied them from the handwritten letter, and have no idea how to spell them or even say them! It is quite a unique letter and brought more than a tear or two to everyone's eyes. (Lenny is Jacob's son - and you will probably remember his brother Freddy. A smart family)

The other photo is of the minister reading the letter with Lenny standing, head bowed and rose in hand. There were over 300 natives there - even some from Ammaroo.

A dry northerly wind has sprung up today to remind us of what's to come in the summer, which won't be far away. We've had a very cold winter and lots of frosts, but the last few days have been mild. It would be nice to get some more rain, as the ground is very dry.

Will keep in touch.

Cheers,  
Carmel.

**From Lenny Jones and family, with photographs**

**TO THE CHALMERS FAMILY**

From Lenny Jones, his father Jacob Jones and his grandfather.

Dictated by Lenny Jones and read by the minister at Mac Chalmers' funeral,  
Tower Rock, Mac Donald Downs, 16/07/04

The Chalmers family have looked after the Jones family. The Jones family from Lake Nash, Alpawa and Arulpa-watja were all one mob at Old Mac Donald when Donald, Mac, Jean and Jessie Chalmers, with their mother and father lived there. Jean and Jessie looked after Lenny's mother. Charles Chalmers (Mac's father) looked after all the Aboriginal people. Back then the people had rations, food and clothes. There was work for the Aboriginal people. Mac followed on from his father - there was plenty of work - fencing and cattle work. Mac taught Lenny and some other people how to drive motor cars and the truck and about fencing. Lenny and his people taught Mac about the Aboriginal ways and the language. Mac could speak Alyawarra very well - like an aboriginal. Lenny remembers going kangaroo shooting with Mac and always coming back to the people with lots of food for everyone.

Thank you very much to the Chalmers family and goodbye to a great man.

From Lenny and his people.

**Mac Chalmers' funeral**



**Minister reading letter from Lenny Jones**

