

Australian Aborigines, the First Broadcasters

How the Australian Aborigines, Although Entirely Uncivilized, Have Developed a Highly Technical and Complicated Method of Communication Through the Use of a Remarkable System of Smoke Signals.

IN the early days of Australian exploration the pioneers were greatly puzzled to know how it was that, wherever they went, their arrivals had been anticipated by the natives. The riddle remained unsolved until the white man realized that the aborigines had a wonderful system of smoke signals.

by which the doings of the bush were broadcast for hundreds of miles.

The study of these smoke signals opens up a story of entrancing interest, one which involves the beginning of the human race. The Australian aboriginal is often described as one of the most uncivilized types of surviving humanity. No doubt there is a good deal of truth in this, for his is probably the only race which has survived, uncontaminated by contact with others, from pre-historic times.

It seems paradoxical that, although the aboriginal's mentality is of a barbarous order, he should yet have been capable of evolving a thoroughly efficient system of conveying messages over vast distances by means of smoke signals, which are as clear in their meaning to him as a telegraphic message is to civilized man.

If it were merely a matter of sending up a column of smoke, the aboriginal's idea of signalling would be merely the obvious method of communicating his own whereabouts, or the approach of an enemy to the camp. But his system is much more comprehensive. By its means he can make known almost anything he desires, for in reality, it is a crude form of Morse code, and must have been in common use thousands of years before the very race to which Morse belonged was evolved.

Signals Repeated

When an important smoke signal goes up, the limit of its significance, or news value, is not confined within the boundaries of the territory controlled by the tribes sending it, but is repeated by tribes who may have been at constant war with the original senders. Thus it travels on till it reaches districts hundreds of miles away, where the senders are entirely unknown.

The fact that these smoke signals were well understood by all is proof that practically throughout the continent, a common code prevailed.

The coastal natives and those inhabiting hilly country, where timber is plentiful, make more frequent use of this method of distributive information than do those of central Australia and the open plains. In no part of Australia are smoke signals more used than in the ranges on the eastern coast of North Queensland. Away inland on the Diamantina, when the country around that river was a happy hunting ground for the aboriginal, the

passing of a traveler through the district would be signalled from one vantage point to another.

It is rather uncanny to know that one's every movement is being watched by unseen eyes, whose owners await an opportunity to become openly hostile.

The aboriginal employs different methods of signalling for different occasions; the most common is to build a fire of dry material, on which he heaps green boughs, creating a dense column of black smoke. If it is necessary to continue the message when that has subsided he repeats the operation.

Another method, and one which requires a good deal of skill, and, at the same time, displays much in-

genuity, involves the selection of a hollow standing tree, with a hole at the base. A fire is made in this hole, and when it is well under way, green leaves are thrown on it. The draught created by the fire sends the smoke

up and racing through the hollow trunk to a great height.

When it is necessary to break the smoke column, a sheet of bark, or the skin of a kangaroo, is thrown

(Continued on page six)



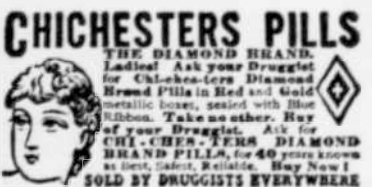
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