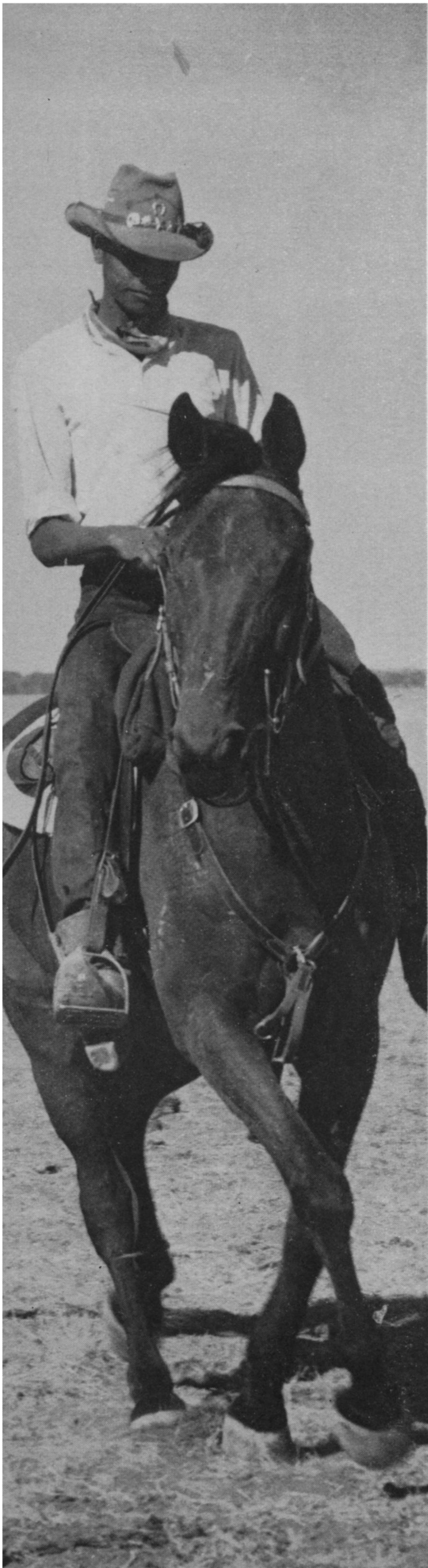

Aborigines combine great talent at stock raising with tribal yen for old customs and communion with the land—which makes assimilation difficult.

Photos: Australian News Bureau

ANTHROPOLOGY

Tribal lands and cattle

Australian natives want their lands back; their supporters suggest the cattle business

by Lennard Bickel

When the Europeans began settlement in Australia less than 200 years ago, there were about 300,000 aborigines scattered in some 500 regional groups or tribes across the continent.

Aborigines are Australoids—a stock distinct from the three main human groups: Caucasoid, Negroid, Mongoloid. They are believed to have walked into Australia from somewhere in south Asia.

Under the impact of civilized occupation and the spread of white settlement the aborigine population dwindled until, by the census of 1958, they had been reduced to 38,000 full-bloods.

Today, this figure is closer to 45,000—an increase partly attributed to a wide range of welfare schemes set up by the state and Commonwealth governments and to mission and welfare centers.

An additional 77,000 part-aborigines have been counted throughout Australia. Some of them achieve fame in sports and a few in the professions and the arts.

The assimilation of the aborigine into the Australian community has been a constant problem to state and Federal Government alike, and millions of dollars have been poured into housing, health and schools. But always the natural free ways of the tribes pull against the regimentation of society.

Now a drive by a small native tribe to gain title to some of its original land has focused national attention on the futility of the welfare approach to assimilation, and brought demands for a more basic program to bring the aborigines into harmony with their surroundings, including their white Australian neighbors.

The small group of the Gurindji tribe numbers less than 60—stockmen, their lubras (wives) and children.

They have come to symbolize the plight of one of the world's ancient races, caught between the hard realism of Western civilization and their heritage of ritual and legend of what they call the Dreaming Time.

Less than two years ago the Gurindjis worked on Wave Hill station, a 6,000-square-mile cattle-raising property held from the Commonwealth Government by the big British pastoral company of Vestey's under a lease that runs to the year 2004.

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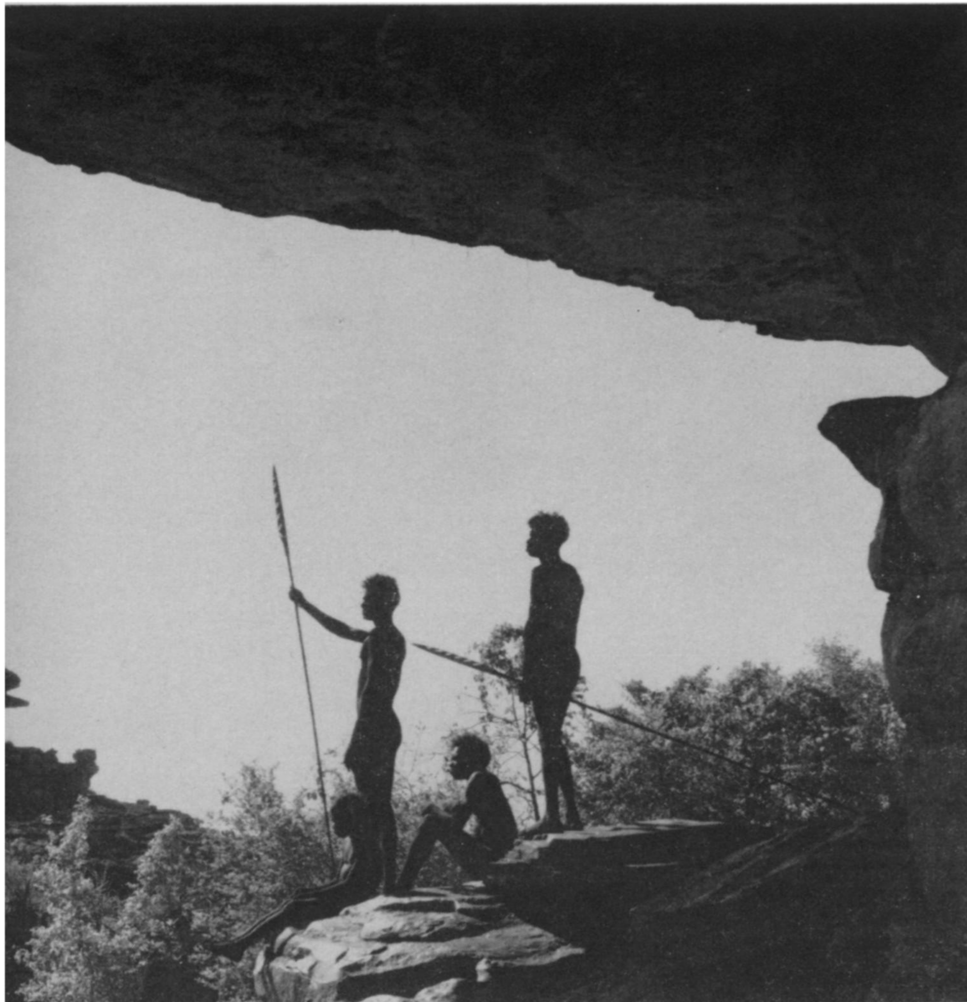

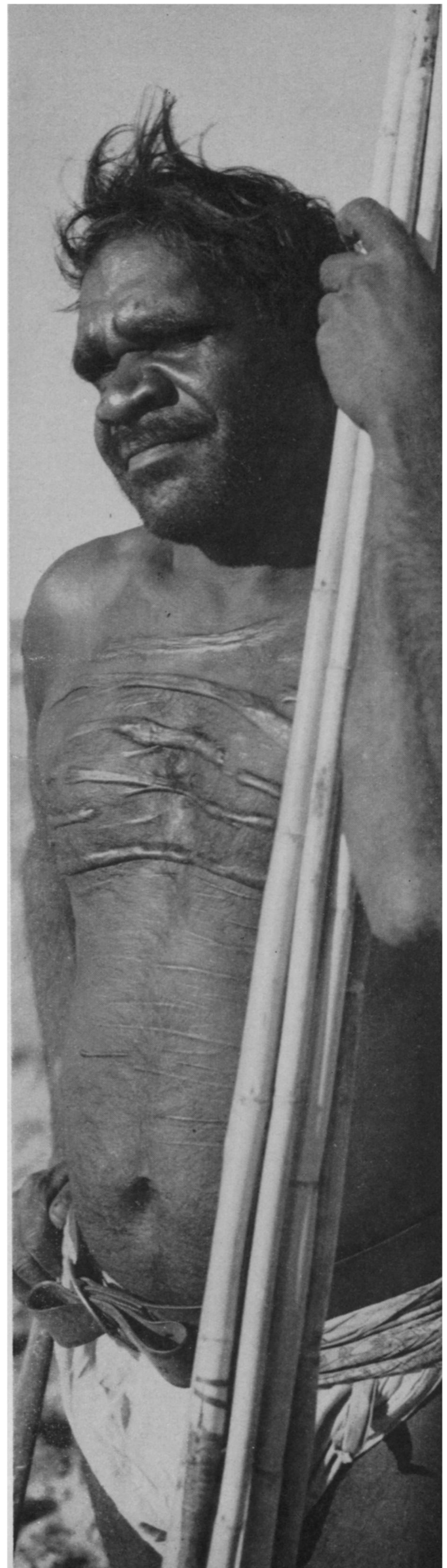

Superb horsemen and incomparable trackers, the Gurindjis have gone walkabout—the aborigine version of a sitdown strike—over a wage dispute.

They reverted to their tribal names, built bark humpies at Wattie Creek in a corner of Wave Hill station and began living off the harsh arid land in the way their ancestors did for at least 18,000 years.

At first these illiterate people sent a bark-written message addressed to "that Lord in Canberra"—the Australian Governor General—asking for a grant of 500 square miles of their tribal lands, most of which are in the Wave Hill lease area.

This request was passed on to the Federal Government; because of its poor prospects the Gurindjis reduced their claim to a mere eight square miles —enough, they said, for them to subsist with a few cattle and vegetable crops.

Now this has been refused, and the refusal has been taken to mean the Government has rejected the principle of returning tribal lands to Australia's aborigines.

In place of what they asked, the Gurindjis have been offered small blocks of land at a near-by established welfare center, with help to build homes and set up small irrigated market gardens.

The Federal decision stunned and shocked associations and groups supporting the aboriginal cause, and a national campaign for the return of ancient tribal lands is being planned for later this year.

The Gurindjis held a council meeting around a campfire 2,000 miles north of Canberra and decided to sit it out until the Federal Government reversed its decision.

The conflict, exemplified by the Gurindji's strike, comes from the close religious relationship the aborigines feel with their land. The remnants of the many tribes, which once ranged in size from 100 to about 1,500 people, each have well defined territory. In general they believe their common ancestors brought preexistent spirits to the lands they wandered, and that this gives them superhuman capability.

The aborigines once were thought to have come to the dry land about 18,000 years ago.

Australian anthropologists now feel

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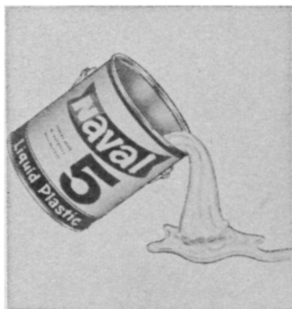

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Pindan aborigines on walkabout, using weapons their ancestors developed.

this event may be even further back in time.

Charcoal found with crude stone implements and finger drawings on the walls of caves in the Nullabor Plain has been carbon-dated to 25,000 years. Stone implements and other objects found around ancient campfires in Arnhem Land, in the far north, suggest a date even earlier.

Some tribes are still nomadic. The Bindibus and the Pintubi are two that still wander the Great Sandy Desert to the west of Alice Springs.

Thought extinct until a vicious drought a few years ago drove them to the fringes of the desert, they are still a Stone-Age people, without clothes, using flint chips as tools, who live on desert lizards and bark grubs—witchetty grubs—and nut cake pounded between round stones.

Other tribes are closer to modern civilization, but their ties to the land are still strong.

Each tribe had its religious ties with sacred sites in its territory, and clans within the tribes were ceremonial guardians of what were regarded as traditional spiritual homes.

The eight square miles being claimed by the Gurindjis on Wave Hill station contain such a sacred site.

Thousands of such sites exist in the multimillion-acre cattle and sheep properties held under Government leases, and the aborigines still associate these with the myths and the ritual that came down to them from the Dreaming.

Australians have begun to grapple with the social problem presented by the aborigines. By a referendum carried by a huge vote last year, the aborigines are now counted as Australian citizens, but they have no title by birth to land—merely the bare right to be on it, to wander and to live, if they wish, in the remote reserves that have been set aside for them.

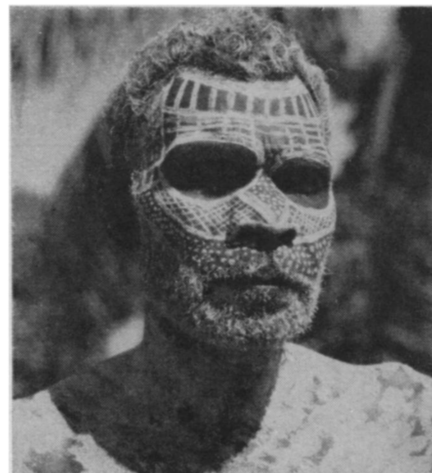
Federal law allows the tribesmen to wander and hunt for natural food throughout these areas—a law which prevents the eviction of the Gurindjis from their enclave at Wattie Creek on Wave Hill.

But the economic problems of assimilation are still a roadblock.

In a few cases where mineral exploitation takes place in these reserves, the resident aborigines benefit from a fund fed by royalties derived from the mining operations.

And Government officials point out that nothing prevents the tribesmen from owning land; there are many who hold freehold properties and mining leases.

But the obstacle of money for deposit or total payment is magnified for a people never endowed with more than a few primitive possessions.



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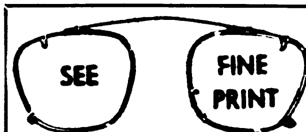

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. . . and their art

Aboriginal art gives clues to past.

Meanwhile more ambitious thinkers are putting forward ideas to make the aborigine self-supporting and still able to live in the lands of his ancestors. Economists and scientists have forwarded views that the top end of Australia has tens of millions of empty acres bursting with opportunities for skilled aborigines, given backing and finance.

Recent advances by Australians in subtropical land improvement now offer a range of legumes and plants, such as Townsville lucerne, that make possible pasture improvement in the Top End Aboriginal Reserves.

Dr. J. H. Kelly of the Australian National University computes that cattle development on this base would maintain the entire population of aborigines in the Northern Territory.

He suggests that a fifth of Australia's two million head of cattle be supplied to this program annually, giving the aborigines $1,000 a head out of $50 million export earnings.

Many Australian scientists agree that the acquired skills of the aborigines as stockmen, plus guidelines laid down by Government scientists, would lead to wide northern development in two or three decades, and provide the solution to the tug-of-war between the past and the present for these ancient aboriginal people.

But the multimillion-dollar funding would mean a new burden on a Federal Government already struggling with myriad development demands—as well as the Vietnam War costs and mounting defense charges.

At present it seems that the plan's advocates will have to sit it out with the Gurindjis at Wattie Creek, and wait for a change of mind—or a change of Government.

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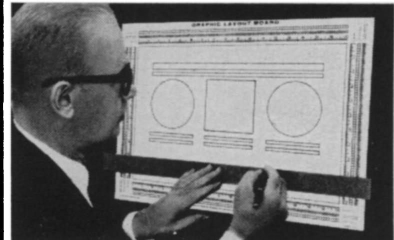

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