



Revolution that started a conversation

AMOS AIKMAN
NORTHERN CORRESPONDENT

It's the greatest Australian engineering achievement you've probably never heard of, and it connected the country to the rest of the world.

Just 35 years after Morse Code was invented in 1837, and six years after a submarine cable first successfully linked Britain to America in 1866, Charles Todd and others completed the Overland Telegraph Line joining Adelaide to Darwin and on to Java and beyond in 1872.

It was an extraordinary feat, given Australia was then a collection of colonies rather than a united nation. It had a combined population of barely 180,000, and more than half the country was unexplored by Europeans.

Todd and his South Australian colleagues beat off competition from Queensland to win the project and accepted extraordinary financial risks. They were confident in their abilities even though few settlers had ventured to follow John McDouall Stuart's first successful north-south traverse, completed in 1862.

Over two years, beginning in September 1870, hundreds of men using horses, bullocks and camels erected 36,000 poles across 3200km of South Australia's flat plains, the Red Centre's deserts and ranges and the harsh tropical north. There were only five deaths, one when a sleeping sailor dangled a leg within reach of a hungry crocodile.

In August, James, Mark and Julian Todd will help mark the 150th anniversary of the overland line by celebrating their great-grandfather's achievements.

"As a family, we think this is a largely unknown story, but one that had a very significant impact by connecting Australia to the rest of the world," James Todd says. "It opened up the country; it shaped the way Australia developed ... it gave birth to Darwin and Alice Springs, central Australian gold mining and the Northern Territory cattle industry."

Mark Todd says the telegraph line provided a "natural avenue" along which prospectors, graziers



EMMA MURRAY

James and Mark Todd at Alice Springs; and below, Alexander Mitchell, Charles Todd, Robert Patterson and John Little



and adventurers could find water as they went about their travels.

Writer Adam Courtenay, working on a book titled *An End to Isolation*, believes building the

line was an achievement on par with the Sydney Harbour Bridge or the Opera House but says it is less recognised because it's not as "easily seeable" by the population.

"It brought us into sequence with the rest of the modern world," he says.

"This is not about crossing space; it's about crossing time."

Derek Pugh, whose book is titled *Twenty to the Mile: the Overland Telegraph Line*, says the time required to exchange messages with Australia dropped "from seven weeks to seven hours".

"It ameliorated the tyranny of distance ... we were no longer a backwater," he says. "Suddenly, everybody could find out about elections; they could get business or family news and sell their produce for the best available price."

The line has been characterised as the NBN of its day, although some may observe the former proved less of a fiasco to build. Todd and colleagues completed their project only seven

months late and were saved from penalties by delays elsewhere. He told an audience some years later it was only upon winning the contract that he "fully realised the vastness of the undertaking I had pledged myself to carry out."

"I was as sanguine as ever with regard to the practicability of the thing, but the short space of time allotted to me greatly increased my difficulties," he said.

The first official telegraph sent via the overland line was dispatched from Darwin on August 22, 1872, confirming the existence of a continuous line spanning the continent.

The Todd brothers will be involved in celebrations commemorating the line, scheduled in Alice Springs and near Darwin in August and elsewhere later in the year.