I have been puzzled as to what part of the trip to Central Australia interested you most, but have come to the conclusion that the stage from Middleton Ponds to Ayer's Rock was fuller of experience than any part of our journeying together.

As you well know, we arrived at Middleton Ponds just after lunch on June 4th 1938, having previously passed through many unusual experiences. (Bob Buck's photograph)

Here we met that kindly old scamp, Bob Buck, known far and wide and made famous by Jon. Idriess in "Lasseter's last ride".

1a

1935 16

Duplicate

a

Journeyman

Clayton's Rock

1935

C. P. Hammond

Wheelbarrow ? a bucket

wine ? grow to the white

9 Brown & Jorgensen

Middleton Ponds is situated on the banks of the Palmer River, the dry bed of which can be seen in the background of the photographs. The station buildings themselves are tucked up against a large sandhill on the sides of which some fine desert oaks are growing.

(Photo Panaramm Middleton Ponds.)

Bob Buck had quite a number of camels, about 50, of fancy, ~~and~~ some of which can be seen in the stockyards adjacent to the homestead.

We had our meal of real bread, milk and eggs in Bobs dining-bed room, and a welcome relief it was to have something different from

the eternal corn beef and damper.

This room looked like an armory, one wall ~~being~~ practically covered with all kinds of firearms, revolvers, rifles and shot-guns, all rusty looking and dusty. None of them, I feel sure, would be of much use in the case of emergency. Even the bed had a formidable looking revolver at the foot, although why it was there instead of at the head was not quite clear.

It was a pleasant sight that greeted my eyes as I came out into the open after tea.

Photo. Station at sunset.

Everything around was rosy with the light of the setting sun, the buildings, yards, and even the black desert oaks took on a more beautiful appearance.

It was from here that we moved off to Ayer's Rock, the scene of the shooting of Yukununna, passing en route through Billy Little's place some thirty-five miles away. As the touring car was out of order, it was necessary to make the journey as far as Little's in the truck. Here we were to meet Brumby with his camel string, by means of which we were to travel to our objective a further hundred miles on.

The Rev.Sexton, who did not want to ride camels, as well as Branson, Hamilton, and tracker Paddy were to stay behind, while Professor Cleland, Strehlow, White, McKinnon, the tracker Carbine, interpreter Sydney Walker and myself were to go to the Rock.

Everyone retired early, the Trinity, White, Strehlow and myself, camping around one fire in the bed of the back waters of the Palmer.

4a

On the morning of the 5th we were astir at dawn for the food supplies had to be resorted for each party, the lorry to be repacked and everything checked for the long journey.

Photo. Bed of Palmer w/ desert oak

The bed of the Palmer, which is a quarter of a mile wide is composed of fine loose sand. as this was too much for the lorry to travel over on its own power, the natives were sent out early in the morning to bring in Bob's donkeys. It was almost noon ~~before~~ when they arrived, then long ears struck well forward, and driven by a crowd of shouting and gesticulating aborigines.

a half an hour later, ~~we~~ our truck was being hauled across the sandy bed of the Palmer by eight donkeys.

urged on by almost as many drivers. I, who ran ahead to get photographs of the incident, became quite exhausted in our endeavours to obtain suitable positions.

The team as it wound its way in and out among the big gums, with the dust raised by the straining donkeys lit up by the midday sun, made a scene which reminded me strongly of Hans Heyson's "Red Gold".

We knew that the trip to Little's was largely over drifting sandhills, but as Branson had been through once before in a car, we thought we could do the same. But we reckoned without our lorry, an old Chevrolet, whose days of youthfulness had long since passed. By one o'clock we had been bogged four times, and by half past four had only covered ~~eleven~~ miles, having had to dig our truck out of the sand seventeen times.

As we had eight passengers and seating accommodation for only four, White and myself decided to ride on the load. The riding position was bad enough, but more exhausting still was the climbing on board after we had expended all available energy helping the truck over the bad spots.

7a

urged on by almost as many drivers. Strehlow and I, who ran ahead to s

It was the same procedure every time. The truck would struggle up a sandhill, getting slower and slower, until with one dying gasp, the engine would expire.

Photo (truck in sandhills)

Everyone would then jump off, dig the sand from the wheels and carry over prickly spinifex, boughs and sticks to lie in the track. We would then push and heave at the back of the truck until it extricated itself, then with a flying leap with whatever energy was left, land breathless and gasping like a dying fish on the lorry.

We stopped frequently to allow the gear box to cool

it becoming so heated because of the enormous low gear work, that the boiling oil was sprayed all over the floor boards and the occupants of the cab as well

About six oclock we came to a gypsum lake in which some remarkably fine 'dead finish' trees were growing.

Here we camped for the night, pleased indeed to rest after such a strenuous afternoon. The truck had been bogged 19 times in the eleven miles we had travelled.

We spent a particularly cold night, and the wood being poor, the fire had to be continually replenished. On examining the thermometer, in

the morning, we were not surprised to see that the temperature had dropped to seven degrees below freezing point.

In the discussion around the camp fire at breakfast, Mr Kinnow retailed the following story, which a well known "parlour" explorer told his Adelaide audiences. According to this "traveller", the temperatures in the interior dropped so low during the night that the water bags froze "solid", whilst in the daytime the ground became so hot that the lizards would not leave the shade because the sand burnt their feet. The "traveller" also said that for the same

reason, fowls flew from one bush to another, and if the hens were forced to remain in the sun for any length of time they laid hard boiled eggs.

An early start was made on the 6th, and by half past seven the trucks was climbing the first sandhill. Looking back on the previous night's camp, I saw an unusual phenomen. The air was perfectly still, and the smoke from the camp fire was lying in a plane parallel to the ground and about 15ft above it, resembling more than anything a white fleecy blanket, mysteriously suspended in air.

The travelling throughout the morning was worse than that of the previous day. In about 5 hours, eight miles only had been covered, the track having been bogged twenty times. Each hill had to be condescended many being climbed a foot at a time. One in particular taking 45 minutes to cross.

Between many of the sandhills were beautiful glades of desert oaks, which gave the place quite a park like appearance. The surroundings were remarkably full of colour, the red of the drifting sandhills, the green of the flowering plants and young spinifex, the almost black trunks and foliage of

desert oaks, backed by a sky of the deepest blue, made a picture which one will remember for many a day.

After lunch, the travelling became much easier and by one o'clock, the track had passed a point, known facetiously by the local residents as the eight mile post. This landmark is nothing but the bleached bones of a camel. As I passed my mind went back to that inimitable story of Stevenson's, in which the human skeleton was used as a pointer to the hidden treasure. (Photo dead camel)

By 2 o'clock, the party had

arrived at Little's, and there found Brumby's camel string waiting for me. Although some members of the party were anxious to "move on", there was little time left to do so, after count had been held, the gear unpacked and the party had had a "wash up".

An attempt to wash my clothes was a dismal failure. The water was so contaminated that the moment soap was added, a thick sediment was formed.

After endeavouring to cleanse the clothes in this water, they were a nasty dirty colour all over, whereas before, the dirt was largely around the

cuffs and collars.

My attempt to wash myself was no more successful, for instead of the water cleansing, it made me feel sticky all over. My hair stood out like a wire brush, and resisted all attempts to coax it into place.

Most of the party went to bed early, thoroughly tired out with their day's work.

Late in the night, however, I heard Billy Little, Brumby and McKinnon talking.

It is not often that the outback settler has a chance of swapping yarns, and they lose no opportunity

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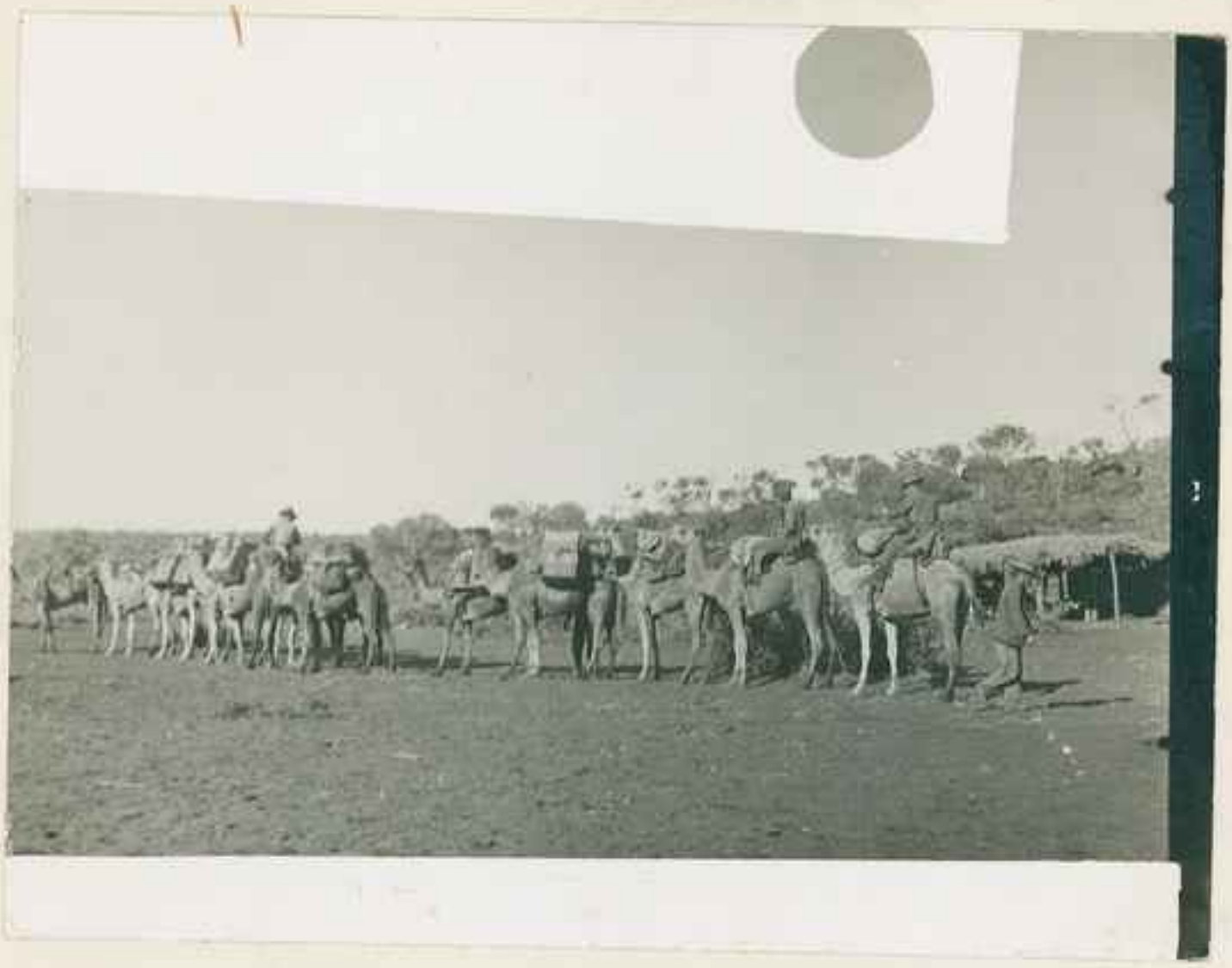

Jack

to do so.

I had a wonderful night's sleep, and felt much refreshed when the Chaouan called me at dawn. The temperature was 4° below freezing at that time in the morning, and it was by no means pleasant, sitting about in the cold, waiting for the camels.

They arrived about half past eight, twelve of them. 4 riding, 2 water carriers and six pack camels. They are grotesque beasts, these camels with their long legs and strangely shaped bodies, looking more ~~like~~ survivals from another age than anything belonging to the present day

16a

Paddy & Wheke

And yet, in spite of their lack of beauty, one becomes quite attached to these funny old creatures, and it was with a genuine feeling of regret that I parted from my mount at the end of the journey.

Let me introduce you to a few of them.

Photo Jack

First, there was my camel, Jack, an old bullock who was getting stiff at the knees,

Then there was Paddy, the calf, of whom you were particularly fond, Another flighty young cow camel, ~~who~~ was entrusted with the bulk of our water supply.

This young matron always

17a

Water Camel

seemed anxious to shed her load, and actually succeeded in doing so on one occasion, spilling one of our drums of valuable water in the attempt. Indubitably, this lady was the mother of Paddy, the calf.

The pack camels, are, as their name implies, used for carrying packs or loads.

This was my first experience with camels,

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and it was with a certain amount of trepidation that I approached my mount. Brumby, however, showed me how to make up my saddle, and demonstrated the best method of riding.

Our camels were the one humped kind, the breed that stands up best under the hardships of the long waterless stages, in fact, it is only with such ungainly irritable creatures that a journey, such as ours, could be undertaken. With loads of five hundred to seven hundred pounds, and, I understand, in the case of the large bulls up to one thousand pounds, they will travel daily twenty to thirty miles, and under these conditions will actually fatten on the wire like growth of the mulga or "dead finish". They will drink water of all kinds, and, according to both Brumby, the owner, and Conley, the driver, can travel up to twenty-one days over country where water is entirely absent.

A camel is guided and saddled in a different manner to that of a horse. A rope tied with a piece of string to a stud like peg, inserted in an artificial hole at the side of the nostril, takes the place of bit and bridle. (See Jack's photo, page 10)

A double saddle fits over the hump. Usually the traveller's bedding and other impedimenta is piled on the front section, while the victim himself is accommodated right over the tail, in a picturesque if not comfortable position. (See page 13.) The motion of the camel is a series of short gentle lunges, by no means unpleasant, and in time no more tiring than the action of any other animal. At first I felt I was far too high up, but the infrequency of accidents quickly restored confidence.

19a

CAREEN

CAREEN

CAREEN CAREEN

Personally I suffered neither inconvenience nor disconfort, and, I think, for a long journey, with time to spare, I would choose a camel in preference to a horse.

C.P.M on camel.

When dismounting the animal kneels in a devout and obliging manner, but thrills are apt to accompany the preliminary performances.

~~Jude Kneeling down~~

As the order "Hooshta" is given, the

obedient beast lurches forward on its front knees, threatening to project its rider into the future. Just as this accident seems about to happen the motion is reversed, as the camel settles down on its haunches. A few backward and forward "oscillations" as the knees and haunches slide outward bring the performance to a close. The experience of remounting is, in a measure, a reversal of dismounting.

The camel is an unhappy creature, crying and moaning at all times of the day. When ever Jack was brought in and "hooshed" down, he started to complain. The action of reaching for the saddle was sufficient to make him burst into a series of groans. These continued whenever a strap was tightened, and even so small an action as buckling a water bag on his neck, called forth a noisy protest. Nevertheless, they dearly enjoy being petted, even though they may emit heart breaking cries while being so treated

However, let us get on with our journey.

Camel strung leaving Lytle's

By half past nine we had everything loaded, and were ready to leave. By midday we were passing north of the Basedow Range, which is sparsely timbered, and not unlike the Adelaide hills.

As this was Conley's, our camel man's first trip out, and he appeared to be a bit hazy about direction, some time was spent during the morning trying to "cut" an old camel pad, which led to Ayer's Rock. It was not until about four o'clock that the pad was found.

As we stopped the string preparatory to camping one of the canteen camels went mad, bucking violently until she had relieved herself of her load of water, which consisted of half our supplies. Luckily only one drum burst. It was well after dark before I finished patching it.

We had a cold night, but a bright sunny morning. To the north the Kurnott Ranges were a rich terracotta colour in the light of the rising sun.

By ten o'clock we were passing between the Basedow and Kurnott Ranges, and on the top of the ridges were occasionally getting a glimpse of Mt. Connor standing up like a huge fort some thirty miles away. By dinner time we were through the ranges, and were passing over stony flats and low ridges. By six p'clock we were camped for the night.

The next morning we were all awakened by a peculiar half rasping, half barking noise. It transpired that the Professor had caught a gekko, or barking lizard, on the previous day, and had placed it in a cardboard box. Arising early he had inadvertently shifted the box, disturbing the gekko, which announced its disapproval with a strange medley of sound.

Gekko

The next morning, which was Sunday, the camels could not be found. White was very sick, the water having upset him, and the rest of the party tired, for we had been travelling hard for days and days without a break, and it was a welcome relief to lie in the sun and do nothing.

I took advantage of the spell to photograph some of the gibber pavements. For centuries wind driven sand had polished these stones, which lie like a closely packed mosaic until they looked as if they had been coated with varnish.

This surface is known by the geologists as "desert varnish" When the sun is at a low angle the reflection from these closely packed pebbles is similar to that from a pool of still water.

Reflections from stones

Indeed, although I knew of the phenomenon, I was not satisfied until a bushman assured me that there was no water about.

It was quarter past two before the camels arrived, and by three o'clock the string was on its way again. The rest, however, was welcome, and had put us in better spirits. Just before we camped that evening the party saw Ayer's Rock for the first time. It was about fifty miles away, and could be distinctly seen on the horizon, with Mt.Olga, showing up , blue and hazy, to the north. There appeared to be nothing but sandhills and mulga flats between us and our objective.

Monday and Tuesday were days of typical desert travel, consisting of nothing more than the climbing up of one sandhill, the descending on the other side, a short journey across a mulga flat, and the climbing up of another sandhill. It was monotonous travelling, but, nevertheless, to me, this sandhill country was unexpectedly full of interest.

Sandhill country

The drifts at the top of the sandhills are a warm red colour, while on the flats grow various types of desert trees.

First there are the mulgas, some of which are highly decorative, although almost devoid of leaves. Then there is the "dead finish" bush, a a well named, unfriendly, acacia, whose sharp spiny leaves come off in the hand as they are grasped.

Mulga

The desert oaks, a dark foliaged tree, whose leaves move even in the lightest breeze, can be seen on the flats between the sandhills. (See photogtaph on page 17)

There are also the bloodwood and cork trees, the latter so called, because of the resemblance of its bark to that of the true cork tree. This tree is a grivillea, and at the time of our visit to Ayer's Rock was in bloom.

A tree which attracts the attention of all artists visiting Central Australia is the ironwood. It is graceful in form, with delicate pendulous foliage.

Ironwood

A lucky exposure, made one night when the camp fire was burning brightly enabled us to ~~the~~ ~~ebbing~~ ~~away~~ ~~nature~~.

On the morning of the 14th. we were all awake at dawn, for we expected to reach the Rock that day, and everyone was anxious to do so. The water in the canteen had gone bad two days previously, and nothing would conceal its horrid flavour. I decided, and the scheme seemed to be most favourable received, to dose the water with Worchester sauce, which, though it burnt the mouth, disguised the disagreeable taste.

There was a beautiful sunrise on that particular morning.

...rich golden browns, reds and scarlets, while some low lying clouds, taking up the colour, intersified it to a brilliancy which cannot be described.

The Rock loomed up red in the distance, the caves and great gutters on its side now showing up distinctly. (See page twenty.)

It was hard to estimate the distance. One would think that our destination was over the next sandhill, but when you had climbed that one, another ridge could be seen half a mile away, while the great rock seemed no nearer.

Camel string going to Ayer's Rock

Lunch
under
desert oak

We had lunch that day under a desert oak.

Strickland, Ayer's Rock

No time, however, was wasted over this meal, for we were all anxious to reach our objective, which, from where we lunched, was a striking picture.

About an hour after dinner we crossed the last sand-ridge, and had, for the first time, an uninterrupted view of the rock. Gosse, who discovered this place in 1873, wrote "This rock is certainly the most wonderful natural feature I have ever seen". Later travellers have told similar stories of its imposing beauty, its wonderful colouring, and its stupendous mass, and these travellers have spoken truthfully, for wordscannot describe its beauty or its size. In our case there was no time to stop and admire, for we were on special business.

As we drew near the scene became more imposing.

The walls rose a thousand feet above us, the rim standing out in strong relief against a sky, torquoise in colour and flecked with dainty cirrus clouds. Far beyond, like the ruins of some Oriental temple, clad in the purple of distance, stood Mt.Olga.

This is a composite image. The watercolour from PRG1218_5_3_38a.tif and the text from PRG1218_5_3_32.tif.

On the southern side, along which the camel string made its way, the Rock rises in a series of domes. The afternoon sun, falling aslant, gave rise to striking patterns on the rounded walls.

Southern side

Agni Rock

We camped that night at Maggie Springs, our bunks only a few yards from a wall nine hundred feet in height.

That evening I borrowed a lamp, and visited some caves about a quarter of a mile away, so that I might copy the native paintings on the walls. It was a strange experience sitting in that cave. The lamp was continually going out, and in the darkness one felt dissociated from everything that was real. It seemed as if I were surrounded by the presence of those who for untold centuries had frequented this cave, painted their their strange symbols on the walls, and conducted their secret ceremonials.

I wondered what would happen if one of the aboriginals belonging to this spot were to come upon me. Would he attack me as an intruder, which he had every right to do, or would he treat me with the courtesy which they so often extend to strangers?

Everything was so still about me, not a single sound. From where I sat I could look through an opening in the tumbled rocks and see the moon sailing along in a clear sky, for the feather-like clouds of the afternoon had gone, and the lower rim of the full moon was just skimming the edge of the great mass of rock above me. A single square of moonlight lit the ground a little distance from where I sat, accentuating the darkness around me. I stayed in that spot, sitting in the dust of ages of occupation, until quite late, returning to camp to spend a restless night, fitfully dreaming of the aboriginies and the cruel treatment accorded to them.

On the morning and part of the afternoon following our arrival, the time was fully occupied in taking evidence and inspecting the cave in which Yukununna was shot.

Immediately after lunch, Strehlow and I decided to have a look around, and if time permitted, to make a circuit of the Rock, which is two miles long and about a mile wide.

We inspected many of the rock holes at the base, fed in the rainy season by waterfalls which pour from the summit. Gosse, in his diary, particularly mentions the beauty of these falls, for during his stay there was so much rain that his waggons became bogged.

In order to indicate its immense size we took several photographs with men standing at its base. In only one of these can the men be picked out, and even then not easily. In this photograph two members of the party can be seen immediately above the arrow head.

We lost sight of one another later on in the afternoon, I being the only member of the party to complete the journey.

As I made my way around the western end, the sun was low, and the red of its light accentuated the colour of the rock so much, that I became profligate, and exposed many colour films in order to make sure I carried home some record of suck beauty. Fortunately my photography was successful, and I now treasure, in full colour, miniatures of this wonderful natural phenomenon.

Continuing my walk I was attracted by a call, and looking, saw high up the rock, two of our party. They waited for me to reach them, and

we continued the climb together. Unfortunately one of them lost his nerve, and was unable to stand. He laboriously slipped down the sloping rock face on his hands and feet to safety. By the time we had escorted him down it was too late to make another ascent, so we contented ourselves by watching the sun set in a bank of fantastic clouds, just behind Mt.Olga.

It was pitch dark when we reached camp, ready indeed for a meal and a night's rest.

We left at midday next day, our camel

string winding its way back to civilisation through the rank grass and bloodwood trees.

I followed on somewhat unwilling feet, for the lure of the great rock was upon me, calling me back to explore its numberless caves, to again walk round its base, and look up its mighty red walls.

Many times, as I watched the rock getting smaller and fainter in the distance, I wondered if I would ever see it again.

I do not know what the future holds of marvel or surprize, but I am sure nothing can erase the memory of that trip to Ayer's Rock which together we shared.

Count - board of enquiry
Cullatta springs

Many times, as I watched the Rock getting smal ler and smalle