

## CHAPTER 5

# ADVENTURES ACROSS NORTHERN AUSTRALIA

*Saturday night at the Sunshine Club [Darwin] / Jumping around with  
the one you love / Doing the twist / Singing the blues / Do any  
dance that you wanna do / 'Cuz when you heat up you gotta cool  
down / That's when the ice man comes around.*

'Waiting for the Ice Man' 

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Torres Strait Islander men began working in maritime industries across tropical Australia. Working out from TI, with crews recruited there, as well as from the outer islands and Cape York communities, they sailed luggers and gathered pearl and trochus shells from Broome on the west coast to Mackay in the east. As experienced and hard workers, the Islanders' skills were in demand, and it was part of a pattern of work-based migration that also took Torres Strait Islanders to the canefields of north Queensland and railway lines in remote regions of Queensland and Western Australia. Those emigrants who left the Torres Strait after the Second World War for employment and educational opportunities helped establish the Torres Strait Islander communities now scattered across Australia. However, some men also left for adventures, to see something of the world after decades of restricted movement under Queensland's race-based laws and regulations, and the Second World War. Seaman was one of those single, young TI men who were keen to travel, learn new skills and meet new people.

Seaman had learnt basic maritime skills in Queensland before learning to dive, and he loved life at sea. It opened up opportunities for travel, and he first sailed to the Northern Territory on board the *Fram*, skippered by his cousin, Pedro Guivarra. The *Fram* had been converted from a trochus to a pearling lugger in Cairns, and needed new equipment:

[So in] early 1952 we sailed up to Thursday Island to hire some pearling gear like divers' helmets and air hoses. And ... get a Southern Cross diesel motor to pump compressed air into the two 150 pound air tanks on board the boat for the divers down below picking up pearl shells.

Seaman recalls that the crew mostly consisted of 'TI boys':

There was Budden Ah Mat, Pedro Wallace [Wallis], Robert Wallace [Wallis], Reggie Lee and Henry Solomon, he was our stern tender ... Joe Garcia, he was our cook. I was the engineer on board. We finished end of 1952 [and] we had Christmas in Darwin. The skipper planned to leave the lugger at the end of the season and the owner Dick Tate wanted to take the lugger back to Cairns. But some of the crew wanted to stay on in Darwin so when they were discharged they found work ashore.

Seaman worked for a bit at the Municipal Council's Botanical Gardens, but then he received a better offer:

I was offered a job in a butcher's shop at the Koolpinyah Cool Stores Ice Making and Butcher Shop. They had a cattle station about 15 miles [24 kilometres] from Darwin at Adelaide River. They'd do the kill there late in the evening and the meat truck would go out there five days a week to get the fresh kill and bring it into the butcher's shop.

It was at Koolpinyah Cool Stores that Seaman first learnt to drive and also learned the new skill of making ice:

We had three ice tanks [about 2 metres high]. We were making these 45-pound [20.4 kilogram] moulds [blocks] of ice, big slabs ... every morning [you'd have to do] what we'd call 'pull the ice'. There's a special hook that you have. There's two holes on either side of the mould on top. Just put the hook on either side and pull it out ... [Then] you stack [the moulds] neatly, lean them up against the tank itself and then you'd turn them over and you'd hose 'em to get the ice to fall out. The ice would land on the concrete floor [and then] go into the cold room. They're there [for] whoever wants to buy ice.

Seaman also delivered ice to homes and businesses — something that was common before the advent of widespread refrigeration. Delivering ice also meant he got to drive around in a nice cool truck in Darwin's oppressive heat and humidity:

I used to do a delivery in the morning and in the afternoon after lunch. I'd take 16 moulds in the morning and I'd have a big ice chopper. Some people they just want half a block of ice, chop it in half. Some — hotels especially — they'd take a full [block of ice]. So I'd carry that

in for them. Then in the afternoon there'd be about 10 blocks, go to restaurants then. And before I do the delivery, the empty moulds that I tipped upside down up against the tank, I'd put them all in and then fill them up with water so they can be frozen overnight for the next day's delivery. [Ice making] goes on in rotation.

Aside from being a cool workplace, it was a good job for other reasons:

Upstairs above the butcher shop there's accommodation for the workers. So we get free accommodation and meat — the best cuts of meat, like fillet steak, T-bone, rump steak, porterhouse. The staff would pay a shilling a pound, which is real good. Because you work at the butcher shop, you know what sorts of cuts are really good.

While his day job kept him busy, Seaman was also involved in the active social and athletic life centred on an area of Darwin known as Parap Camp. It was ex-army housing left over from the Second World War (118 Parap Camp, now Stuart Park). The war had also scattered the civilian Darwin community, and when they returned, the 'mixed-race' and non-European population was centred on Parap. It was basic housing and times were tough, but strong communal bonds were established and a rich social and cultural life emerged, including active music and dance groups. Athletic groups were also important, and Seaman played Rugby Union and Australian Rules Football with multicultural teams, which included many TI and Aboriginal players, and also the future singer-songwriter and Administrator of the Northern Territory, Ted Egan. Seaman would later record Egan's 'Sayonara Nakamura',  an iconic song about the dangers of pearling.

At Parap Camp around this time, Seaman had his first opportunity to perform with other musicians. Recalling those first performances there, he recalls:



118 Parap camp housing, Darwin, c. mid- to late 1950s. Courtesy NT Library, Roderick Collection, image no. PH0110/0426.

Darwin musicians  
c. mid-1950s, [l-r]: Peter  
Cardona, Ken Hazelbane,  
Seaman Dan, Rusty Perez.  
Courtesy Jeff Corfield.



There were a lot of nice Darwin people there. We used to go to dances and I used to sit in with the Darwin boys [Peter Cardona, Rusty Perez, Russell Cruz, Clive Dowling, Delfin Cubillo, Dave and Ken Hazelbane]. We formed a musical group, like a band sort of thing, and we were often invited to play at dances. We were young and happy. It was the first time I started singing for my supper.



Darwin musicians c. mid-  
1950s, [l-r]: Seaman Dan,  
Peter Cardona, Rusty Perez,  
Clive Dowling. Courtesy Joy  
Cardona and Cardona family.

He also reflects that, even now in his mid-eighties when performing on TI and Horn Island, 'Nothing's changed! I still sing for my supper — and I like it!'

There were particular styles of music that were very popular with the Parap audiences:

It was after [the Second World War], so it used to be [slow fox trot or 'slow drag'] where you could hold your partner close. Another favourite would be the progressive barn dance. You form a circle and you dance on and change partners as you go along and you go [steadily] around that circle.

The progressive barn dance was also an effective way for young men and women to meet, and some relationships and even marriages resulted from these social events.

Moving from performing casually for friends at small community dances into a more professional context in public was the next step in Seaman's musical education:

I went to a party one night in Darwin, and I'm playing away and singing away and this mate of mine [Div Collinson] he plays in a four-piece combo in the Hotel Darwin. So [Div] said, 'You know, you don't sound



Darwin musicians c. mid-1950s at Parap Camp, [l-r]: Clive Dowling, Ray Perez, Ken Hazelbane, Delfin Cubillo, Seaman Dan. Courtesy Joy Cardona and Cardona family.

too bad. How would you like to come up to the Hotel Darwin on a Saturday evening and when we have our 30-minute break, sit in for half an hour?’ He said, ‘I don’t think we could pay you but, you know, you can sing for your supper.’ I said, ‘You’re on, mate!’

What Seaman needed then were more songs to sing. At the time, he had a girlfriend, Mary Powers from Cairns, and she had a 45-rpm record of Nat King Cole singing ‘Embraceable You’ and ‘Makin’ Whoopee’. 🚢 So he learnt them, and they were the first songs he sang professionally in public. Almost 60 years later, in 2012, he would record them for *Sunnyside*, an album of his favourite Nat King Cole songs. Aside from singing at hotels, he also performed at Darwin’s multicultural Sunshine Club, a venue for community dances and social functions set up because the Northern Territory’s race-based laws and regulations prevented Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and ‘mixed-race’ people from entering local venues. The range of music and dancing styles at the Sunshine Club was eclectic, and hearing and performing many different styles of music provided Seaman with a very useful musical training ground.

As much as he loved singing, Seaman still had to earn a living with a day job, and singing inadvertently led him back to sea. He explains:

Once the audience [in Darwin] knew I was from TI they always asked me to sing ‘Old TI’, 🚢 which is a very nice song, [but] it makes me homesick every time I sing it.

Seaman’s home back on TI was never forgotten while he was working away, and he knew he would return eventually.



Top: Seaman Dan with diving equipment in Darwin, c. mid-1950s. Courtesy Henry Dan Private Collection.

Bottom: Seaman Dan (right) being helped on to the deck of the CSIRO research vessel *Paxie* off Western Australia or the Northern Territory, c. late 1950s. Courtesy Vern Wells Collection and Peter Illidge.

After several years working ashore in Darwin, Seaman desperately wanted to return to the sea, and also to North Queensland. This was partly because he wanted to see his mother in Cairns, but he also felt he 'had been away too long [from TI]'. So in 1956 he signed on to the *Paxie*, a vessel gathering data for the pearling industry:

Commonwealth Fisheries chartered this vessel to do surveys on pearling beds. They were looking for new pearling beds to help our pearling industry out from Darwin, out from Thursday Island, out from Broome. Because there were too many pearling vessels out working, they were depleting the shell-bearing areas. So we had to have more areas. They were in Darwin at this particular time and I knew the research officer, Cliff Middleton. He was a good friend of mine from Thursday Island. Every time that vessel leaves port there's always a research officer from the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation [CSIRO] on board.

Seaman told Cliff he was homesick — even though 'I had a good job there at the butcher shop. I was on seventeen pounds a week plus free accommodation and when I worked Saturday and Sunday I get another three pounds each couple of hours that I worked, but I wanted to get back home to TI'. However, the *Paxie* was headed out first to do some surveys:

Cliff Middleton said, 'We're leaving tomorrow to work out from Darwin; we've just come back from Broome. And we'll be out at sea for ten days and when we come back I'll introduce you to the skipper. If you want to come back to TI with us you can come and be a deckie or a diver like you used to be, to go back home.' I said, 'All right.' So [later], when I spoke to the skipper, he said, 'All right, I'll sign you up as a diver, so instead of just working your way back to TI you'll be getting diver's wages.' At that particular time, it was £49, 19 shillings a fortnight. So I signed up as a pearl diver then, went back to pearling again.

When Seaman had learned to dive in Queensland, he was either free diving for trochus shells or using only the helmet and corselet to dive for pearl shells — he had never used a full diving suit. However, the *Paxie* used half-suits.

I had to learn to use the half-suit, which was much better than just the helmet and corselet. There's hardly any weight at all for the tender, the man that looks after your lifeline on deck. Because with the helmet and corselet, to bring you back up on deck he's got to 'skull drag' you up but with the half suit you can inflate yourself and come up slowly, come up gently. And [a tender] can see the loose lifeline in front of [him] and he just takes in the slack as you're coming up to the surface, which is much easier.



*Paxie at sea off Western Australia or Northern Territory, c. late 1950s. Courtesy Vern Wells Collection and Peter Illidge.*

The full suit was sometimes used by Western Australian divers, but according to Seaman:

It's too cumbersome, you can't zig-zag, there's no freedom of movement, not like the half suits. You can cross, zig-zag, from side to side — you cover a lot of area. But with the full suit you get dragged behind the drift of the boat, you just go in that one direction.

However, as he soon discovered, a full suit had its benefits:

In 1957, we went down [diving] in July, wintertime. And we were wondering, Gee, these Broome divers here they're using the full suit. They're too cumbersome. They're too slow. We soon found out why they were using the full suit. They were warm inside! We were all wet and cold [just wearing diving flannels]! So when we used to come up on deck and take the suit off we would dive straight down into the galley. And the cook, George Dewis, he'd always have the kettle on and he would make a cup of tea or coffee for us until it was our time to go back up on deck again to go [back] down.

Avoiding decompression sickness — or 'the bends' — was a major concern for divers. There were other underwater dangers from sharks, gropers and strong tides, but the bends was a constant threat, especially for men who dived several times a day. Seaman explains how divers 'staged' safely after diving to depth for any length of time:

You've got to come up in stages. So your first staging level from [say] 28 fathoms is 15 fathoms and you hang there for five minutes. [Then]