

Walgett—

then

and now

It's history now. The story of how two young Aboriginal boys were locked up in 1964. How Harry Hall and the waterside workers began protesting about it. How the old town "closed up" and isolated them. The setting up of the Walgett Aborigines Progress Association, with Harry as its President. Then the coming of Charles Perkins and the university students' "freedom rides". The publicity. Walgett became a household word meaning discrimination. Then slowly, slowly, the little town began to thaw. The colour bar was broken in hotels and in the picture theatre. It took years, but now Harry Hall can walk down Walgett's main street and be "seen" and greeted by most of the town's citizens.

Harry does not claim that Walgett is now perfect, by any means. But he *does* claim that it has improved tremendously for dark people since the sixties. There are Aboriginal members in the

bowling club, the R.S.L. and the golf club now—something that would have been unheard of, once. All the hotels are free. The town atmosphere is better. "It's the same in Moree," says Harry. "Some time ago, Charlie Perkins was in Moree. He was asked into a bloke's home to have a cup of tea. This bloke, a white man, told Charlie that there had been a big change in Moree since the freedom rides. And he added, 'someone should have done it twenty years ago.'"

A look in Walgett's Oasis hotel shows whites having a drink with Aborigines. They do it without self-consciousness. They do not think that they are doing anything out of the ordinary and that is how it should be. There are people in Walgett who look down on this; who say that these people drink with the Aborigines for a reason. Occasionally this may be so, but Harry Hall says that there are plenty of cases where this is definitely not true. He says that there is a good cross-section of people in Walgett who do it purely out of friendship. And he points out that they are doing it out in the open, too. The dark people know who is genuine and who isn't. Let them be the judges.

One of the Walgett locals told me that Aborigines were becoming better off all the time and that they no longer "know their place." It's because of Harry Hall, of course. He is a "dreadful man, an absolutely terrible man." At this point, I couldn't help smiling, thinking of the even-tempered, reasonable and easy-going Harry Hall whom I knew, being described as an "absolutely terrible man." "He is a troublemaker," the person added. "He's put new ideas into Aborigines' heads, so that they won't work for you anymore. And as for mixing with Aborigines—that'll be the day!"

Says Harry: "I can understand why so many whites in these small towns are anti-Aboriginal. They see them at their worst, everyday. But people