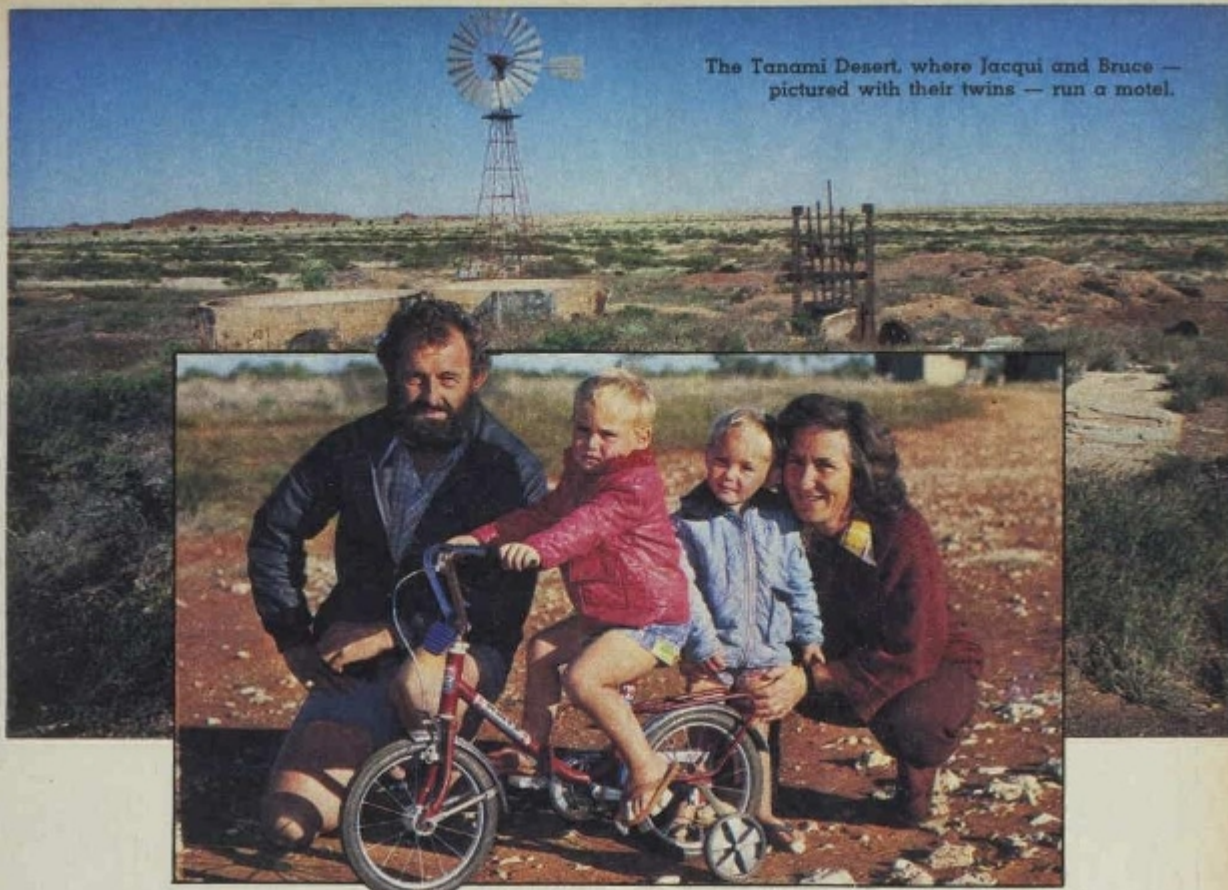


Romance along 'tragedy track'



The Tanami Desert, where Jacqui and Bruce —
pictured with their twins — run a motel.

In the Tanami Desert, about 600 kilometres west of Alice Springs, there is a sign that reads: "Boissons froids et Essence — Cold drinks and petrol."

It is a strange sight in the middle of the desert, possibly the last place in the world you'd expect to find such a notice in French and English.

The Tanami Desert has been called "the land that God forgot" and the

"the land that God forgot" and the rough road that runs through it is known as Tragedy Track. Many people died of thirst along the long saltbush track as they rushed to make their fortunes in the West Australian goldfields at the turn of the century.

You wouldn't imagine anyone wanting to live here. No one does, apart from a few people living at Mongrel Downs cattle station and the Aboriginal reserves. And Bruce Farrands and his Parisian wife Jacqueline.

Jacqui, as she prefers to be called,

**"Please send mousetrap,
some wheat for chooks,
and a long-haired
maid," said the message**

came to Australia 15 years ago. She had travelled widely in Europe but was looking for more adventure.

She moved to Melbourne and began to read books about the Northern Territory to help her English. "There was so much romance in those books," she said, "I wanted to see the truth."

She moved, again, to Alice Springs where she got a job as a cook. She fell in love with the Territory, "because here people made more of an effort to understand me."

Months passed and Jacqui began to make a few friends. Then, when the wet season set in, one of her friends from Mongrel Downs approached her with an

offer of a job as station cook. He had a mate called Bruce flooded in at the station, he said, and had received a half joking, half desperate telegram from him saying: "Please send mousetrap, some wheat for the chooks, and a long-haired maid."

Jacqui, whose hair was long at the

Jacqui, whose hair was long at the time, went to Mongrel Downs with the message "Here are the supplies as requested."

So Jacqui found her romance in the bush. She married Bruce Farrands and lived at Mongrel Downs, cooking real French meals for the stockmen.

But Jacqui and Bruce wanted something of their own. They couldn't afford to buy a large property so decided to lease a small block of land, in the middle of the desert, and build a motel.

"It took us eight months of arguing with the government to get them to agree to a lease," said Jacqui. "After the eight

CONTINUED OVERLEAF

'Tragedy track'

FROM PAGE 41

months it was put up for auction, but as there was no one else silly enough to bid for it we got the land. Since then it has just been hard yakka."

Rabbit Flat, as the Farrands call their patch of saltbush desert, had very modest beginnings. The "motel" was a row of 15 tents, and Jacqui had to strain tadpoles from a nearby lagoon to get drinking water. But in those early days, when the supplies came in, she would treat her guests to four-star French cuisine — a rather unexpected delight for travellers on the Tanami Track.

Jacqui helped to build a big tin shed with a bar and poolroom for the guests, and a bedroom and storage room for herself and Bruce. They now have an ablution block for visitors, and hot water whenever the generator is on.

"You either have the country in your veins or you don't," said Jacqui. "Now I

"You either have the country in your veins or you don't," said Jacqui. "Now I don't go into town (Alice Springs) unless I have to."

Three years ago Bruce and Jacqui rated a small mention in metropolitan newspapers. The headline read: "Population of Rabbit Flat doubled overnight." Jacqui had given birth, prematurely, to twins.

The twins, Glen and Daniel, are shy, healthy children, and when they reach school age Jacqui intends to take full charge of their education. She wants them to learn French and to accept her values. "I won't have some socialist moulding their minds," she said.

When Bruce introduced cold drinks and alcohol to his roadhouse, he also introduced problems. Rabbit Flat suddenly became popular with people from the Aboriginal reserves. Some demanded 24-hour service and camped overnight, outside the bar, to make their point.

Jacqui got scared, especially when Bruce went away. She also became bitter about another problem that was developing. This was her bit of land that she and Bruce had fought for and won; now their lease was being threatened by people who claimed an ancestral right.

Rabbit Flat had entered unwittingly into the Aboriginal struggle for land rights, and the Farrands said they wouldn't leave without a fight.

Recently the Federal Government announced that it would approve a tribal claim in the Tanami Desert. But the Farrands' lease is not included.

And so the sign along Tragedy Track still reads: "Boissons froids et Essence — Cold drinks and petrol."

— JANE CAMENS