Koombana Days

Annie Boyd

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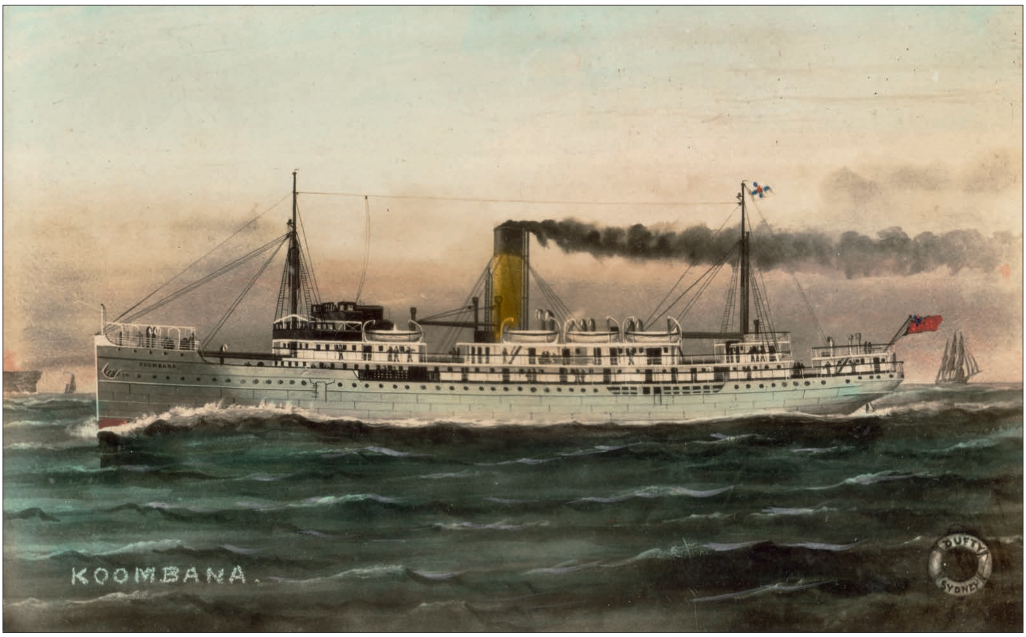


Postcard illustration of S.S. Koombana *by Alfred Dufty, Marine Artist, Sydney, c. 1909.*

1

A Ticket to the Future

It was all carefully orchestrated. As S.S. *Koombana* crossed the Indian Ocean, the Fremantle office of the Adelaide Steamship Company released a statement. State manager William Moxon told the press that although the vessel would arrive on February 11th, she would only remain in port until the following afternoon. There would be a brief opportunity for representatives of the press to come aboard, but any opening to the public would have to wait a few weeks, until the ship returned from necessary inspections in the east.

William Moxon admitted to a second reason for contacting the newspapers. There had been mischievous rumours, he said, that the new ship was too good for the Nor'-West and would not long remain on the run.[1] Yes, he conceded, she was larger and more luxurious than any vessel that had traded in these waters, but fears that she would be stolen away for other service were completely unfounded. The vessel had been designed and built for the Nor'-West run and no other thoughts were entertained.

Whether there were any rumours—or any mischief other than William Moxon's—may never be known. What is certain is that the promised press opportunity delivered precisely what the company sought: extensive coverage of the *Koombana*'s first arrival, and glowing reports that would reach the ports of the Nor'-West before the ship commenced her regular running.

The invited guests who came aboard on Friday, February 12th, 1909 were unanimous in their praise.[2] In its evening edition, Perth's *Daily News* declared:

> "The Last Word" in shipbuilding and general appointment is the most adequate phrase to be used in connection with the new Adelaide S.S. Co.'s Koombana, which put into Fremantle yesterday and sailed again for Melbourne and Adelaide at 2 o'clock to-day. At the invitation of the Adelaide S.S. Co. a number of shipping and mercantile identities,

S.S. Koombana*, 1909.*

> as well as representatives of the daily press, were invited on board the Koombana at 11 o'clock this morning, and were met by Mr. W. E. Moxon, the local manager, who introduced the visitors to Mr. G. P. Maxfield, the superintendant of stores for the Adelaide Company. The latter gentleman then devoted much time and energy towards showing the visitors over the new vessel, and when he had finished at 1 p.m., everyone felt that they had had a very interesting experience. Owing to the lack of space today, a full description of this fine modern craft will be held over till tomorrow, but it must be said that the Koombana is about the best-appointed boat that has ever been seen at Fremantle. Built especially for the Nor'-West trade, the comfort of passengers has been studied to the last degree, every invention and convenience known to the maritime world has been used in her building, in fact, in the language of one visitor, "she would do credit to any service in the world."[3]

Although the top-down tour began at the navigating bridge, it was along *Koombana*'s long promenade deck that the visitors began to realise that a new standard was being set. They were ushered inside, through wide double doors, past French-polished, bevelled-glass book cabinets and into an elegant lounge, identified by their guide as the First Class social hall. The pressmen were greatly taken by the charm and sophistication of this room, so distinct and somehow dissociated from the ship's industrial exterior. A correspondent for *The Hedland Advocate* reported:

> There is an air of repose about this room that at once strikes the visitor, and forces that person to make visual inquiry as to the cause. The first thought is that one has arrived in the salon of some grand dame, but a glance at the book case with its mullioned frames and bevelled glass rather modifies the idea. The couches, occasional chairs and tables are in polished walnut. The furnishing was done by Waring and Co., art furnishers, of Glasgow, and little more needs to be said. The scheme of colour is purple and green, the former being used in the upholstering, and latter for the carpets. The wood work is satin wood and panelled in sycamore stained art green. There are two Chippendale writing desks, and a Broadwood piano, the music stool being also the music cabinet. The light well and fanlight are artistically designed. Here, as in other rooms, the fanlights are controlled by a wheel and raised or lowered from inside. The ceiling is done in painted canvas with raised design picked out in gold.[4]

From the First Class entrance on the promenade deck, a broad staircase led down to the spar deck. The *Advocate*'s man continued:

First Class social hall, S.S. Koombana.

Koombana*'s First Class dining room.*

> The dining saloons for both classes are on this deck, and both are done in green and oak. Ventilation has been particularly studied, and the pantry so arranged that orders can be served from both sides as soon as they arrive from the galley by the electric lift. The first saloon has seating accommodation for 75, and electric fans are provided here as throughout the ship. The lavatories, on this deck, are replete. The appointments of the dining saloon and the wealth of table silver are revelations.[5]

From the dining room, carpeted passageways led aft to First Class staterooms arranged in small 'islands'. It was clear to the visitors that even the corridors had received careful aesthetic treatment.

Perhaps some members of the visiting party were surprised by the keenness of their guide to take them down the galley stairs into *Koombana*'s kitchen. His intent was soon clear. For electrical wizardry the galley surpassed even the navigating bridge. A telephone switchboard and warning lights, it appears, were no match for an intelligent egg boiler and a mighty bread maker.

> The kitchen is also on this deck, and in it are all sorts of modern contrivances that should delight the heart of the chef, as well as provide delicacies for the passengers; steam egg-boiler, with electric

Looking aft along the port-side corridor on Koombana*'s spar deck.*

> adjustment, which may be set for soft, medium, and hard, swinging the egg off on the register being reached; an electric lift to the dining rooms; steam press with revolving hot plate rack; five stoves, bake oven and grill, and many other appliances. An electric dough mixer, turning out 300 loaves in eight hours, and the printing room are on this deck.[6]

Koombana's main and lower decks were fully enclosed, although with steel ventilation ports that could be opened or sealed according to sea conditions and the needs of livestock. Through this underworld the guided tour continued, past moveable cattle stalls, in and out of refrigerated storage, along the stanchioned sides of open hatchways one above the other, and ultimately to the engine room. Even to those untrained in engineering, the brand-new 4,000-horsepower triple-expansion steam engine was a commanding presence.

Koombana*'s decks.*
Below the navigating bridge, shaded by a canvas awning, is the captain's cabin on the bridge deck. The next level down is the promenade deck, where a girl in a white dress may be seen leaning over the rail and watching a boat being lowered. Behind her is the First Class entrance; through double doors and to the right is the First Class social hall. Directly below the social hall, on the spar deck, is the First Class dining room. And below the spar deck, behind portholes, are the galley and crew cabins of the main deck. Lower still, fully enclosed, is the lower deck, sometimes called the orlop deck.

S.S. Bullarra*,* Koombana*'s immediate predecessor on the Nor'-West run.*

Through the two hours of the tour, the pressmen were kept so busy and so entertained that few probing questions were asked. All were impressed, but several wondered how so grand a ship, serving a string of isolated outposts, could possibly be run at a profit. It had been announced that when *Koombana* returned from Melbourne, she would take over the Nor'-West running from the old *Bullarra*. It was difficult to accept that two ships so different in scale and sophistication could reasonably be sent to the same work. This was no stepwise progression; it was a giant leap—and a leap of faith to boot. Company man William Moxon seemed unfazed by questions from *Koombana*'s nervous admirers. "This ship is ahead of the times," he told Fremantle's *Evening Mail*, "but with it we will build up trade and coax people to travel. Anyone who has looked over the vessel must be convinced that it will prove a powerful factor in developing trade with the Nor'-West."[7]

To understand the Adelaide Steamship Company's decision, it is necessary to trace its deliberation. By 1906, the company had recognised that the Nor'-West coast of Western Australia had a bright future. It was a self-defined province of pearlers and pastoralists, many of whom had grown wealthy on very simple principles. Indeed, almost all of those who had amassed small or large fortunes had done so in one of three ways: by growing wool, by fishing for pearls and pearl shell, or by raising beef cattle. A defiant optimism was now supported by three pillars of prosperity.

In 1905–6, the total wool production of Australia and New Zealand was almost 2,000,000 bales. The nascent Nor'-West wool industry accounted for only about one per cent of that gargantuan clip,[8] but the Nor'-West industry had some characteristics that made it attractive to the shipping companies. The state was huge, and wool-growing had proven profitable in almost every district. Because the small mixed farms of the south were fully twenty degrees of latitude from the million-acre expanses of the north, shearing seasons were greatly staggered; demand for wool shipment was spread across autumn, winter and spring. There was a broad consensus that an industry so dispersed was unlikely to fail. For more than a decade, wool production had grown steadily and stubbornly, despite bad years and an almost total lack of infrastructure. Promised improvements to roads, jetties and tramways could only enhance prospects, and some went so far as to predict that the industry would soon eclipse Broome and its pearls.

The rise of the Broome-based pearl-shell fishery had indeed been spectacular. Between 1902 and 1906, the pearling fleet had grown from 220 to 350 boats, and from 1700 to about 2500 men. Although the 'take' per boat had dropped a little, few doubted that the industry, already contributing £200,000 annually to export revenue, would continue to thrive. Like wool-growing, the industry had shown great resilience. During that four-year period, the price of shell had suffered a great concussive fall, from £205 per ton in 1903 to £105 per ton in 1904. Even at the lower price the industry remained profitable, and all indications were that exports to London would continue unabated.[9]

Not surprisingly, pearlers and wool growers reserved their greatest faith for their own industries, but to impartial observers it was the beef cattle industry that held the greatest untapped potential. It was a little over twenty years since the first herds had been driven westward across the top of Australia to the great savanna grasslands of the Kimberley. On unfenced land and with minimal husbandry, the cattle thrived and multiplied.[10] In the early days, dry-season droving was a problem, but the first artesian bores along the stock routes delivered sweet water in hallelujah quantities.[11] At the beginning of 1907, when the Adelaide Steamship Company began to consider seriously the construction of a dedicated Nor'-West steamer, the Kimberley and its cattle were very much in the news. On February 2nd, a correspondent for *The Western Mail* delivered a tidy summation of the state of the industry:

> On a map of Australia and with Wyndham as the centre, describe a circle having a radius of 400 miles. . . . The area within the circle will include all the Kimberleys and the best portions of the Northern Territory. According to stockmen who have recently been droving from the Western Australian boundary to Queensland, there are one

> million head of cattle within this region. Official returns, admittedly defective, place the number at about 800,000. There can be no doubt, therefore, that by virtue of its geographical position Wyndham should become the Chicago of the North.[12]

The Adelaide Steamship Company understood that the transportation of livestock would be an important part of its Nor'-West business. Whatever else the new ship would carry, Kimberley cattle would come aboard as honoured guests.

Through the first years of the twentieth century, Nor'-Westers were keenly and self-righteously aware of their rising contribution to the state's coffers; they became ever more demanding of their distant government. Each official visit—by Premier or Colonial Secretary or Minister for Public Works—was seen as an opportunity to petition for civil improvements: roadworks, port facilities, flood mitigation, water supply and lighting. Inevitably, some action resulted; shipping agents reported a steady rise in northbound cargo, not only food and supplies for growing towns, but also the materials of progress: pumps, piles, fencing wire, sleepers, rails, timber, and the ubiquitous corrugated iron. Everywhere the inadequacy of cargo-handling facilities was lamented. By 1907, every Nor'-West port listed jetty and tramway improvements among its most pressing needs. For the Adelaide Steamship Company, with a new steamer on the drawing board, that demand crystallised as a specific design requirement. The new steamer would have capacity great enough, hatchways large enough, and winches powerful enough to lower a steam locomotive to the floor of her hold, and deliver it over her side to waiting rails.

As the company contemplated a new vessel, it looked for any avenue of expansion for its Nor'-West passenger service. Per head of remote population, demand for passage to and from the capital had always been high. For that, the harsh northern summer could be blamed or thanked according to one's viewpoint. Every year almost half of the white population[13] fled south at the beginning of the wet, returning only when the sky cleared and the temperature fell. In the quest for competitive advantage, luxury became the Adelaide Steamship Company's new focus. Two questions emerged: If a new level of comfort and convenience were offered, how much trade could be stolen from competitors? And how much would demand grow if the voyage ceased to be an ordeal and became an indulgence?

At a glance, the Nor'-West did not look like a luxury market. In fact, to first-time visitors, several of the ports seemed little more than shanty towns. The statistics, however, showed that the region should not be judged by its rusty facade. There was broad prosperity here: a few individuals of great wealth and a great many of comfortable means. The price of saloon passage did not seem to be an issue. There was no evidence that the pastoralists or pearlers had ever baulked at the cost of sending their wives and children south, for school or summer respite or even for wedding preparations. It seemed that well-heeled Nor'-Westers, deprived of luxury and entertainment in their winter working lives, would rush to enjoy whatever the company was adventurous enough to offer.

Through 1906, the Adelaide Steamship Company marked time and kept its own counsel, but two key developments during the year tipped the scales in favour of a bold move.

Nor'-Westers had long campaigned for the construction of a railway from the coast to the mining centres of Marble Bar and Nullagine. In March 1906, after a decade of disagreement and delay, important progress was made. A government-commissioned report delivered two unequivocal recommendations: that Port Hedland should be the starting point of the railway, and that work should commence immediately.[14] Although all of the shipping companies would benefit from the two-year, £250,000 project, the Adelaide Steamship Company stood to gain most. Almost all wool and pearl shell from the Nor'-West was bound for Britain and Europe, but the route taken varied from company to company. The Adelaide Steamship Company carried wool and shell south to Fremantle, for transfer to the Royal Mail steamers on the home run. Dalgety's, representing all of its competitors, shipped north via Singapore. Because the rails and sleepers would travel north from Fremantle, the work was a perfect fit for the company whose heavier loading was in the opposite direction.

For the board of directors in Adelaide, one prerequisite remained to be met. For several years the company had held the contract for the delivery of Nor'-West mail, but the current agreement was due to expire. Only upon renewal of the contract would the directors commit to the construction of a dedicated Nor'-West steamer. On December 7th, 1906, the company was advised that its tender had been accepted; a new contract, to begin on March 1st, 1907, would deliver £4,000 per year for three years.[15] The monetary consideration was not huge, but it was a reliable contribution to profitability, unaffected by drought or recession. It also carried a symbolism that could be turned to commercial advantage. Of all vessels regularly visiting a remote port, the mail boat was the most anticipated; indeed, the title almost guaranteed a positive engagement with each port of call.

In the combination of mail and rail, the Adelaide Steamship Company found the competitive advantage it had sought. Four weeks into the new mail contract, on March 25th, 1907, the directors authorised the preparation of detailed plans for a Nor'-West steamer, with every appliance and convenience available. In capacity and luxury, the company would go where no competitor could afford to follow.[16]

The broad requirements were quickly worked out. The ship would carry about ninety passengers in First Class staterooms and 130 in Second Class cabins. No lower standard would be offered. The ship would carry at least 4,000 tons of general cargo and a further 800 tons in cold storage. Moveable stalls on the main deck would accommodate about 200 cattle.

It soon became clear that the new ship would be similar in size to the company's interstate liner *Grantala*. A design challenge immediately emerged. *Grantala*, on her design draft of 24 feet, would struggle to gain admission to any Nor'-West port.[17] To negotiate the shoals of Shark Bay, the jetty at Carnarvon, or the sandbar at Port Hedland, the new ship would need to draw significantly less water. Precisely how much less would require a careful analysis of tides and port facilities, both existing and promised. It would also require an engineering assessment of the impact of reduced draft on the ship's stability.

Port Hedland quickly emerged as a limiting factor. Even on a draft of 19 feet, the ship would be unable to cross the bar and reach the jetty on a neap tide. She would be locked out—or worse still, locked in—for about three days in every fourteen. The problem was greatly exacerbated by the fact that the round-trip travel time from Port Hedland to the usual terminus port of Derby was seven days: exactly one quarter of the lunar cycle. If the ship northbound were to enter Port Hedland on a spring tide, with a few feet of water beneath her keel, she would inevitably be locked out on her return. The only possibility, it seemed, was to negotiate Port Hedland on the shoulders of the spring tides, arriving a few days before the full moon or new moon, and returning a few days after. One thing was certain: managing the new ship's schedule would not be easy. Finally, the company's engineers arrived at the design draft of 20 feet 11 inches, fully three feet less than that of *Grantala*. The shipbuilders, yet to be chosen, could advise on whether that stringent condition could safely be met.

In September 1907, at the company headquarters in Adelaide, plans and specification were presented to the board.[18] A few weeks later, tenders were called for the construction of a steamship to be named "Koombana".[19,20] And in the minutes of the director's meeting held on December 4th, 1907, the engagement of a well-regarded Glasgow shipbuilder was recorded:

> s.s. "Koombana".
> Cable to London Agents of the 29th November to accept the tender of Messrs. A. Stephen & Sons, Linthouse, for a 13 knot steamer, dead-weight capacity 3100 tons on 20 feet 11 inches draft, classed British Corporation, Babcock's boilers.
> Cable from London of the 3rd instant advising having closed with Messrs. Stephen & Sons for £92,500, delivery 20th November next.[21]

That "Koombana" required a leap of faith cannot be doubted. The greatest single risk for the Adelaide Steamship Company was its unavoidable reliance upon government assurances, especially with regard to port improvements and the construction of the railway. When the contract with Alexander Stephen & Sons was signed, the *Pilbarra Railway Bill* had passed through parliament, but no date had been set for the commencement of work.[22] Similarly, the government had committed to the construction of four new Nor'-West lighthouses, but it was difficult to predict when even the first would be commissioned.[23] At almost every Nor'-West port the viability of the venture depended on civil works yet to be completed, and recent history suggested that good intentions did not convert readily into tramways and jetties.

If the slow progress of port improvements cost the directors some sleep, their choice of shipbuilder did not. Alexander Stephen & Sons had built a reputation for high-quality workmanship, and had delivered several large luxury ships. Their work on "Koombana" did not disappoint. In the course of construction, there were several changes to the specification, all positive in effect. The builders had contracted to deliver 3,000 horsepower and a speed of 13 knots; by negotiation, the final result was 4,000 horsepower and 14½ knots. Even the design draft of 20 feet 11 inches was revised downward a little, the final measured value being 20 feet 8 inches.[24] The Adelaide Steamship Company's representative on site reported very favourably on the quality of equipment and fittings supplied. Significantly, Alexander Stephen & Sons understood the importance of luxury to the project. In *Koombana*'s cabins, dining rooms and social hall, they not only obeyed the letter of the specification;[25] they entered into its spirit and executed the work with great verve and finesse.

Koombana returned from the east on Monday, March 8th, 1909. It was almost ten months since Captain John Rees had sailed for England by the Royal Mail Steamer *Orontes*. It had been a fascinating odyssey, through the last stages of *Koombana*'s construction, her launch and sea trials, and the voyage from Glasgow during which something new was learned every day.[26] Now he was keen to depart for the Nor'-West, taking *Koombana* to the work for which she had been built.

The first trip would be no gentle orientation. It was summer's end, the busiest time of the year, and manager Moxon had managed well. A great splash of positive publicity four weeks before departure had ensured that *Koombana* would begin her working life heavily laden and with a large complement of enthusiastic passengers. Moxon had made much of the fact that the ship had been specially built for the run, and Nor'-Westers were predisposed to accept his assurances. Somehow, the ship seemed like an acknowledgment: a reward for years of perseverance in the north.

On the morning of Friday, March 12th, a large crowd gathered at Victoria Quay, Fremantle. Although the usual banter passed between ship and shore, *Koombana*'s first Nor'-West passengers brought more than common cheerfulness to the rail. The mood was ebullient and celebratory. And when the last line was dropped and the ship slid into the stream, it was difficult to know whose success was being celebrated.

2

Narrow Seas

On Tuesday, March 16th, 1909 the *Geraldton Guardian* reported:

> S.S. KOOMBANA.
> AGROUND AT SHARKS BAY.[1]
> VESSEL SAFE.
> Considerable surprise and regret was expressed in Geraldton to-day, when the news got about that the fine new steamer Koombana, which was so much admired on the occasion of her first visit to Geraldton on Saturday, was aground at Sharks Bay. The news was contained in an official message from Sharks Bay to the Geraldton Postmaster, received to-day, and read as follows:—
>
> "Koombana grounded 14 miles out 7 a.m. on Monday. Mails landed at 2.30 p.m. Weather hazy. Unable to see steamer yesterday. Haze cleared this morning; vessel now in sight through glasses; still aground. Local seamen are of opinion that Koombana will probably remain aground four days at least . . . No danger need be entertained, as the bottom is soft sand and seaweed . . . There is some fine fishing in this channel, and the passengers should have no difficulty in amusing themselves for four or five days."[2]

Captain Rees had visited Shark Bay many times; he knew it well. After rounding Cape Levillain he steered the usual south-easterly course for the Heirisson Flat Buoy, which marked the southern edge of a narrow channel leading to Denham. Finding that sewing-needle opening would be his first navigational challenge as master of *Koombana*; with a generous helping of bad luck it would become his first major blunder.

In clear air the passage was perfectly manageable. A black buoy, the port mark for the channel, was usually sighted first. If proper course had been maintained, the red Heirisson Flat Buoy would appear dead ahead a few minutes later and a gentle turn to port would bring the ship into line. For *Koombana*'s first arrival, however, visibility was poor. Cloaking everything was a thick haze that limited visibility to a few hundred yards. The early morning light was strange indeed: the sun, rising through the mist over *Koombana*'s port bow, appeared dull and red, and the foredeck was bathed in a warm orange light that seemed at odds with the darkness of the sea.

Koombana proceeded slowly, with Rees and his chief officer Henry Clarke together on the bridge. They agreed that with the sun low over the port bow the first mark could easily be missed. When a bright buoy appeared dead ahead, their shared assessment was that the port mark had slipped by unseen. The two men looked closely at the buoy ahead. They agreed that it was the red starboard mark. Captain Rees swung the ship to port and ordered Full Speed Ahead. Moments later, *Koombana* ran onto an isolated mound of sand and ground to a halt. She was stuck fast with her head east-south-east and a list to starboard, with the navigation channel and the incessant south-westerly wind on her starboard side.[3]

Sun and sea-mist had played a trick on two experienced men. Hidden in the brilliant white of sunshine are all the colours of the rainbow, but sea-mist does not treat all colours equally. Blue and violet are more easily caught and scattered away, while red and orange may pass unhindered. Stripped of its blue hues, the sun that rose over *Koombana*'s bow appeared as a rusty red ball. And it was the red remnant of a once-white beam that bathed the foredeck and gave a faded black buoy its rose tint.[4]

The Shark Bay lighter *Success*, in anticipation of *Koombana*'s first arrival, had started out early and dropped anchor at the usual rendezvous point. When *Koombana*'s tall yellow funnel was spotted, all on board watched what appeared to be an extremely cautious approach. Some time passed before the observers realised that it was not slow progress that *Koombana* was making, but none at all. With more than an inkling of what had occurred, they weighed anchor and went to investigate.

When *Success* came alongside, good-natured banter passed between steamer and lighter. There was no indication whatever that the passengers perceived a serious problem or anticipated a long delay. And when two pearling cutters joined the lighter at *Koombana*'s side, the mood became positively festive.

The skipper of the lighter came aboard for a short conference with Captain Rees. The two men decided that nothing was served by delaying the discharge of Denham cargo. The work commenced immediately, with some passengers remaining on deck, chatting with the crews as slings of supplies were swung over the railings and lowered. Finally, after four or five disembarking passengers had made the crossing in a wicker basket, the job was done. *Success* and the two cutters departed in convoy.[5]

An arrangement had been made with the skipper of the lighter. On arrival in Denham he would send a telegram to Fremantle on Captain

Rees's behalf. During the night, an attempt would be made to free the ship; if that failed, Rees himself would come to town in the morning.

Until the next high tide, there was little for *Koombana*'s officers to do but to help the passengers pass the time. One passenger would recall:

> In the evening, in the exquisitely-fitted, tastefully-furnished music room a concert was held, and as is usual in the case of musical evenings organised in the dark, much pleasing talent was brought to light, some not quite so pleasing, but all doing their best to make the time pass merrily and pleasantly. The first officer's sympathetic baritone voice, the second officer's artistic handling of the mandolin, and the chief engineer's "auld Scotch sangs in the braid tongue" were received with special appreciation. The best part of the evening was when we gathered round the piano and heartily sang the old-fashioned choruses.[6]

As on most late-summer evenings in Shark Bay, the wind blew hard from the south-west. It was strangely reassuring to be aboard a ship so utterly unmoved by wind and white-capped sea. In rousing chorus around the piano, few found anything to be concerned about. The grounding was little more than a good story to tell friends and family in a few days.

While his officers attended to the serious business of keeping the passengers happy, Captain Rees retired to consider his position. The grounding had occurred at almost the worst possible time. If *Koombana* had struck at low tide, she would already be free, but he had run onto

S.S. Koombana *aground in Shark Bay, March 1909.*

the bank at the top of the tide. Worse still, the ship had struck the bank under full power and had ridden up. Precisely how much she had ridden up was difficult to gauge. He would order a full circuit of soundings in the morning, and then have the sea's rise and fall monitored hourly from the lee-side rail.[7]

Shark Bay tides were unusual: not for their range, which was only about five feet, but for their unusual lag behind the phases of the moon. At most ports the highest tides occurred a day or two after the new moon, but here in a shallow, windswept gulf that tapered away to marshland beyond the southern horizon, the highest tide could lag the moon by almost a week. The new moon was six days away. Even without local advice, Captain Rees figured that if *Koombana* were not refloated in the next two days, she could be stuck fast for ten. It is likely that he did not sleep well.

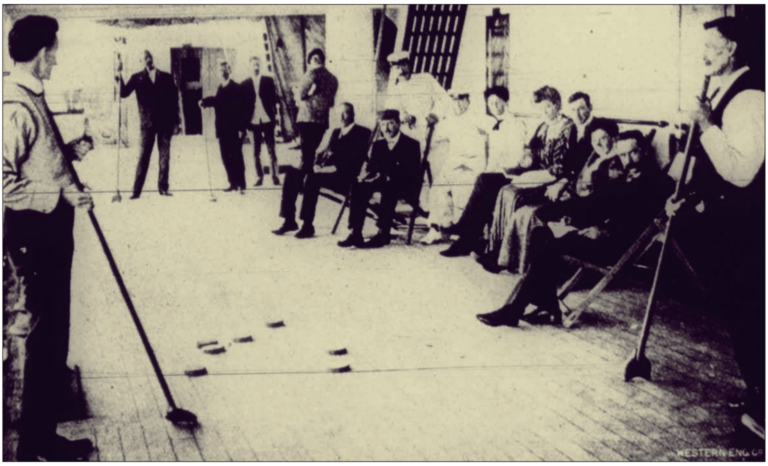
At daylight, after an unsuccessful attempt to pull the ship clear using stream anchors,[8] Rees declared his intention to visit the telegraph office. Three hours later the motor launch with nine men, a case of beer and a basket of sandwiches was ready to depart. To his friend Peggy back home, fourth engineer Jim Low wrote:

> The Chief went to drive her and I went to do the work. The Skipper and Purser went to send the telegram, three passengers went for excitement and two quarter masters were carried to bale her out.[9]

To passengers in need of diversion, the excursion seemed more like an expedition to a foreign land than a fourteen-mile dash to the nearest settlement. As the boat dipped into the swell, it became clear that none on board would arrive dry, if they arrived at all. For a few minutes the spectators watched as the bow of the launch cast sea-spray like fishing net. But when the propeller's milky trail suddenly darkened to sea green, all guessed that the motor had been swamped or had stalled. Up went a sail, and back came the boat.[10]

The second attempt was more successful, and when the source of amusement had shrunk to a speck, the crowd dispersed. One Broome-bound passenger, destined to be remembered only as "Chronicler", began recording his thoughts.

> The passengers, and even the officers, seemed in good spirits and confident of an early move, and so we set ourselves to make enjoyment. Some availed themselves of the fine library of fiction in the music-room, some of the ladies gave themselves to fancy needlework, the men were chiefly found in the smoking-room at cards or draughts. Many of the rest beguiled the hours at the exciting and noisy games of rope quoits and deck billiards, while a favoured few consoled themselves by the time-honoured and strangely fascinating pastime of flirtation.[11]



Deck billiards on Koombana*'s promenade deck.*

It is said that the camera never lies, but this game of deck billiards was more challenging than the photograph suggests. This camera sat upon a tripod on *Koombana*'s promenade deck, but the deck was not horizontal. The ship had come to rest with a list of four degrees to starboard. Here now, at gravity's insistence, is the photograph realigned.[12]

Deck billiards, with a starboard list.

As the *Geraldton Guardian* had predicted, passengers soon discovered that there were fine fish to be caught from the rail. And "Chronicler", pleasantly surprised at the satisfaction to be had from this writing game, waxed lyrical.

> Fishing, too, was indulged in, and one fish-fancier hauled in a six-foot shark. He was a tiger, and vigorously objected to leaving his native

> element. But when a Winchester sent five leaden ideas into his dull head, one per medium of his left eye, one through his nose, and the rest between his grinning jaws, he seemed more prepared to submit to fate. Then a noose was passed over his body, and he was hauled level with the lower deck, where a bright youth extracted half a dozen molars and another hewed off the tail for bait, after which the hook was cut free, the noose loosened, and the remains committed to the deep.[13]

Aboard the launch, the wind had strengthened soon after the second departure. The nine 'expeditioners' landed on the beach at Denham, soaked to the skin. After Captain Rees and Purser Reid had departed for the telegraph office, the others willingly accepted offers of dry clothes from locals keen to learn more of *Koombana* and her circumstances. A pearler's wife asked how the ship was getting on for provisions.

"Nearly run out," replied one of the passengers. "Fact is, ma'am, we're eating the poultry consigned to Cossack and other places."

The woman seemed taken aback. "Surely the captain has no right to kill other people's fowls?"

The invitation was too good to refuse. "What are we to do?" the passenger rejoined; "He can't see us starve. Anyway, we've nearly run out of chooks. But there's a donkey aboard, and there's talk of starting on him next."[14]

Jim Low was pleasantly surprised by the welcome that began on the beach in the morning and continued into the night. To Peggy he wrote:

> When evening came the weather was too bad to go back so we had to stop in the tin hotel that night. The inhabitants thought it was up against them to entertain us so gave a ball and party in a tin shed. All the ladies turned up, the daughters and wives of the pearlers, the wife of the policeman etc etc. There is no class distinction in Shark's Bay except between White and Black. We had a most enjoyable evening and broke up about 3am.[15]

As the 'ball' wound down, Captain Rees informed Low and the quarter-masters that their services would be required at 5 a.m. for their first assignment of the day: to retrieve the launch, which had been left on a mooring a hundred yards offshore.

At first light, the boat was fetched and the late-night revellers roused and rallied. The party set off in good style, with the motor, as Jim was wont to say, "snoring along nicely." Unfortunately, snoring turned to apnoea as the launch ran out of fuel. To Captain Rees's annoyance and the young engineer's chagrin, sails were again hoisted. At midday on Wednesday, March 18th, after thirty hours away, the launch came alongside under wet canvas. It was, Jim conceded, "a most ignominious return."

Back on board, Rees was keen to review the soundings and tide measurements taken in his absence. The soundings had delivered useful information: *Koombana* was harder aground at the stern than at the bow. The tide results, taken by plumb line from the lee-side rail, were also interesting: the officers had discovered that the water level continued to rise for half an hour after the tide turned. Clearly, the currents here were not simple ebb and flow. It was as if the ship was on the rim of a great, slow eddy.[16]

The measurements also confirmed that the tides were lagging the phase of the moon by several days. The new moon was now only four days away, but the neap had only just been passed. Captain Rees drew some consolation from that. At the telegraph office in Denham, he had not known if *Koombana* was capable of freeing herself. He had erred on the side of caution and had requested that another steamer be sent to assist. Having now spoken with his officers, he was satisfied that his decision had been the right one. Early on Thursday morning, a boat from Denham brought news that another of the company's steamers, the collier *Winfield*, had left Geraldton in the early hours. She would be at *Koombana*'s side within 24 hours.[17]

The decision to discharge *Koombana*'s cargo cannot have been taken lightly. Crew morale was a prime concern. All had expected to be back in Fremantle at the beginning of April, but now the northward run might not begin until the last week of March. Certainly, the crew would be paid for the time they were away, but none would see their wives and girlfriends for another month at least. Upon the seamen in particular, the planned transshipment was a huge imposition. Work would continue around the clock, with the men working sixteen-hour days.[18] The firemen would be affected, too: some would be seconded from the stokehold to join the men on deck. Rees realised that morale would only remain high if the men's efforts were respected, and seen to be respected. They would be kept well informed of progress and, above all, be well fed. Fresh food posed a particular problem. *Koombana* had just delivered the only fresh fruit and vegetables in Denham; it would be impolitic to buy any of it back. But consignments for Broome and Derby were a different matter; indeed, most perishable consignments would not arrive fit for sale. Rees decided that, since cargo spoilage or loss would account for only a small fraction of the cost of the accident, he would place the interests of passengers and crew above those of the consignees. His men would work hard, but would receive grapes crisp and cold with their sandwiches at lunch, and be rewarded with beer and sardines at the end of each long day.[19]

It was not only the working men who discovered a new enthusiasm for food. "Chronicler" marvelled at his own dining-hall punctuality.

> As a relief in the programme of amusements, the sound of the bugle calling us to maxillary warfare was a thrice-welcome sound, for we

> developed appetites of which our mothers might be proud—but anxious.[20]

Rees reminded his officers that to keep the passengers in good humour was an important part of their work. Here too there was evidence of creative thinking. In the evenings, the passengers had taken to gathering on the port side of the promenade deck, out of the wind. To create a bright, pleasant space in which passengers might mingle, the arc lights used for loading and unloading in port were switched on. The effect was sudden and surprising: into circles of clear, illuminated water swam sea snakes, turtles and fish in great numbers. Thereafter, evening conversations were often drawn to the rail and to the passing parade below.[21]

The suggestion was also made—by whom is not known—that passengers might be taken on a fishing trip in one of the ship's boats, with a member of the crew in command. It seems that Rees's reaction to the plan was a simple "Why not?" He could certainly spare a junior officer for a few hours. The first such diversion was a great success. With official sanction and company chaperone, the passengers sailed ten miles to a little island, returning at day end with sixty schnapper for the galley.

Entries in Koombana's log for Friday, March 19th, reflected new purpose and optimism.

> Fresh to strong SSW breeze.
> 6 a.m. Sounded West of ship and found 3½ to 5 fathoms.
> Hands employed lowering and hoisting boats, preparing gear and stripping hatches for the discharge of cargo.
> 2.15 p.m. S.S. "Winfield" arrived alongside and made fast.
> 3 p.m. Started to discharge cargo from No. 2 into "Winfield".
> Hands working cargo right through, one hour for tea, half hour for supper. Tanks sounded at frequent intervals.[22]

In principle, the plan was simple: sling by sling, hold by hold, *Koombana*'s cargo would be transferred to *Winfield*. At each high tide, a halt would be called. With the ships side by side, using both ships' engines, a new attempt would be made to break free. There was, however, one difficulty that no creative thinking could overcome. The ship had come to rest on a bank sloping down to starboard. Only on that side, to windward, was there water deep enough for *Winfield* to come alongside. For the duration of the transfer, at all hours, the two ships would bump and grind, scour each other's sides, and destroy every cork or wicker fender placed between them.[23]

Despite that ceaseless metal-on-metal antagonism, spirits remained high. With *Koombana* becoming lighter with each passing day, and the tidal range now increasing, the plan must ultimately succeed.