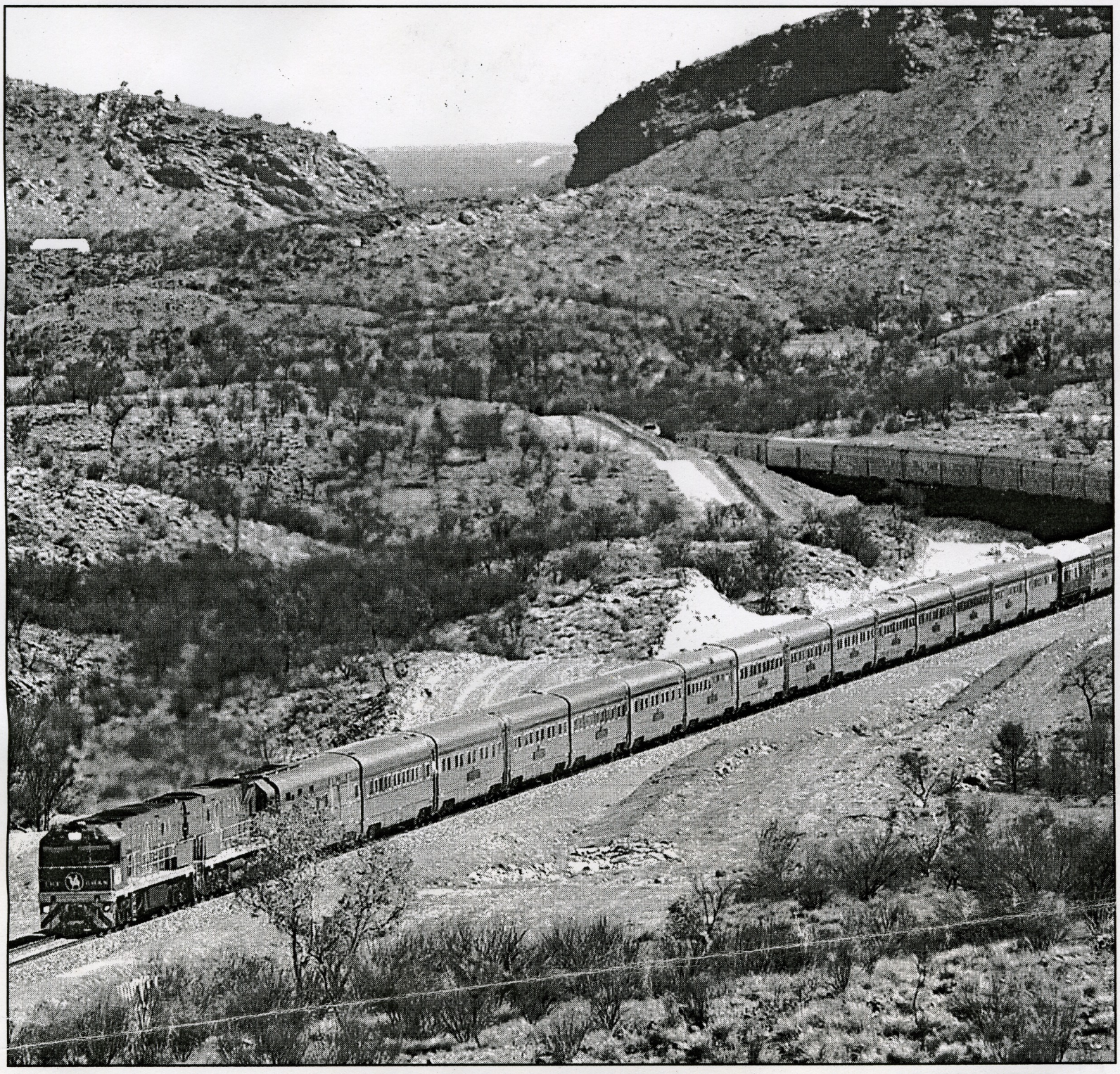
Dream steams on



The Ghan snakes its way north towards the Top End after leaving Alice Springs yesterday. Picture: LEX BALLANTYNE

Crowds cheer Ghan

By PAUL DYER

The Ghan passenger train took its first tentative steps into history when it headed north of Alice Springs for the first time yesterday afternoon.

After getting away on time, the train was forced to make a brief, unscheduled stop outside the town to assess a water supply problem in one of the passenger carriages.

But after 10 minutes the problem was solved and the show was back on the road.

After crossing the NT border about 8am, hundreds of people lined the track to welcome the 1.068km train as it pulled into Alice Springs at noon.

Still more crowds farewelled the 320 passengers on their historic northward journey at 3.10pm.

Northern Territory Chief Minister Clare Martin, a VIP on the train, said The Ghan was expected to bring up to 20,000 visitors to the NT each year.

"With The Ghan passenger train accommodating up to 500 people each way, this means thousands more tourists will soon be making their way to the NT," she said.

"This will be a tremendous boost for the local tourism industry and help its recovery after September 11, the Bali bombings, SARS and the collapse of Ansett.

"Passengers heading either way on The Ghan will spend time in Territory hotels, travelling, dining out, shopping and experiencing all that there is on offer in the Territory."

Ms Martin said international and domestic tourists were also expected to fly into Darwin and Alice Springs to catch the train.

"On Sunday, thousands of South Australians turned out at Port Augusta to celebrate the arrival of the train."

Gough travels in style

By PAUL DYER

At 87, former Australian prime minister Gough Whitlam is the oldest passenger on The Ghan's first journey to Darwin.

But yesterday he lamented not being able to make the trip a whole lot earlier.

"I am delighted that Australia has now fulfilled the transcontinental railway which my government and the then premier of SA inaugurated 30 years ago," he said. "If arrangements premier Don Dunstan and I made 30 years ago had proceeded without interruption, it would long ago have been complete."

Mr Whitlam blamed the Australian federal government system for the delays.

Mr Whitlam encouraged older generations to experience the rail journey.

"It is not easy for me to get up and into and out of these carriages — but the people who are running the services make that as easy as one can," he said.

Mr Whitlam is travelling in the luxurious VIP-only Prince of Wales carriage, which was built more than 80 years ago.

The wooden carriage, which is decorated with stained glass windows on the cabin doors, stands out among the silver metal of the rest of the train.

Mr Whitlam and Max Stuart board the train

Mr Whitlam's Prince of Wales carriage

World media crew hitching a ride

The eyes of the world are focused on the Northern Territory.

More than 45 journalists and news crew members were on The Ghan. And a further 40 travel writers are flying into Darwin to make the return journey tomorrow. They include correspondents from the BBC and the *Sunday Telegraph* in London, *National Geographic* magazine and the international wire services Reuters and Associated Press.

A team from Japan's NHK television station is also filming a documentary.

Six carriages are being used for the media contingent, including a dining car, a bar and a media centre.

"THE TRAIN NOW STANDING AT THE TERMINAL IS THE FIRST PASSENGER TRAIN TO DARWIN FROM ADELAIDE"

Tourism Top End and the people of Darwin take this opportunity to welcome all passengers arriving to Darwin on the Ghan, and may you all enjoy a wonderful visit to the Top End.

A trans-continental rail link from Adelaide to Darwin was first proposed in 1858 - and on 3rd February 2004 the dream became a reality with the arrival in Darwin of the first passengers aboard the Ghan.

TOURISM TOP END
wild life - wild land