

CHAPTER 6

SILAS ROBERTS

Silas Roberts was one of Maningrida's leading citizens; he originally came from Roper River, but moved for personal reasons. He was not forgotten by his family and relatives who would arrive in great numbers to visit him. He was quite well educated and was on a variety of committees and boards in the Aboriginal scene.

He had a cheque account in Darwin, and frequently asked me to help him balance his budget to prevent his going into the red. It was traditional for Aborigines to give hospitality to their visiting relatives, who, in the past, could have walked considerable distances. With the advent of charter flights, Silas's relations would arrive by plane and stay for ages, until it became necessary for him to decide whether to charter another plane to get them back home or have the expense of providing for them at Maningrida. With modern transportation, it seemed that this part of the traditional system could become a financial burden.

Silas, a real gentleman, led a very busy and stressful life. He was a church member and would occasionally take the service. Sometimes he would come into my office for a chat just to get things off his chest. He said he was sure that most white people did not appreciate how difficult and stressful it was, especially for tribal Aborigines, to be called away to meetings in Darwin and Canberra, particularly when new policies were being formulated — one day to be in the bush, eating traditional foods, and the next, lunching with the Prime Minister. He was genuinely concerned for his people and their rights. Unfortunately, he did not live long enough to see all his dreams fulfilled.

The Silas Roberts Hostel for Aboriginal People in Darwin was named in his honour.