

Boomerangs Down Under—

A remarkable flight through history

by Jack Goldfarb



In a deserted green field near Melbourne, Vic., Australia—host city of the 1993 R.I. Convention—I tightly gripped the crescent-shaped stick of wood in my hand. Angling it slightly against the breeze, I flicked my wrist and hurled it into the air. It skimmed across the grassy turf, soared upward into a wide turn and started back in my direction. Morris Maxwell, one of Australia's better-known boomerang enthusiasts, stood by my side, ready to congratulate me on the success of my first-ever boomerang throw. But congratulations dissolved into consolations when my spinning missile abruptly plummeted to earth some distance away.

Maxwell insisted I keep trying. Three attempts later, my whirling boomerang finally came hovering above our heads and floated down, close enough for me to catch it—which in my excitement I didn't—but Maxwell gave me the "thumbs up" signal to indicate a worthy throw.

For the past 11,000 years, people have been flinging boomerangs in Australia. Like the kangaroo, koala, platypus, and Sydney Opera House, the boomerang is claimed by local devotees and patriots to be a uniquely indigenous Australian product. The boomerang, the Aussies insist, was first invented by the Aborigines.

Captain Cook and subsequent explorers did much to popularize Australia as the land of the boomerang by bringing back many samples, along with tales of the remarkable feats performed by boomerang throwers Down Under.

Historians and archaeologists, however, have disputed that throwsticks—the great granddaddies of boomerangs—originated solely in Australia. They have considerable evidence that throwsticks were used as combat and hunting weapons in

ancient Africa, India, Europe, and North America. Scholars assert that the throwing stick was devised "simultaneously" (if that word can cover thousands of prehistoric years) by primitive man on at least four other continents. In Egypt, for example, archaeologists discovered exotic gold-capped ivory throwsticks, fashioned from naturally curved elephant tusks, in the crypt of King Tutankhamen.

The flight pattern of a simple throwstick has fascinated human beings for centuries. Anthropologists believe that some of the more ingenious warriors and hunters, observing that their

magical powers were at work.

So what *does* make a boomerang fly, and why do some return? The simplest explanations are: its "wings" generate lift; its spinning gives it stability in the air; and its spin plus forward motion create "gyroscopic precession"—a veering to the left which gradually leads it back to the thrower.

Ironically, the vast majority of Aborigine boomerangs do not return. The image of a circling boomerang is one popularized by Hollywood, the mass media, and a few overly enthusiastic tourism operators. Aborigines rarely used returning boomerangs—and then usually only to hunt water fowl, so that their weapon would not be lost in the water. Tourists should remember this fact when they purchase so-called "authentic" Aborigine boomerangs in certain areas.

Australian Aborigines have been credited with giving the boomerang its name. With more than 300 words used by Aborigines (in as many native languages) to describe the flying woodsticks, the catchy sound of "boomerang" caught on with the Aussies. It is derived from *bou-mar-ang*, a word used by the Turawal tribe who once lived near present-day Sydney.

The original Aborigine boomerangs, shaped like large 7's, were cut from mulga and acacia trees. They were highly valued as weapons because they hurtled toward their targets with greater spinning force than heaved rocks. They had a multitude of uses: for igniting fires, as cutting and digging tools, as toys for children, and as musical instruments, rhythmically clacked together as accompaniment for dancers and chanters. Brightly painted boomerangs were used in religious ceremonies and coming-of-age rituals. The boomerang also served as an art form, with designs and symbols illustrating Aboriginal legends and traditions.

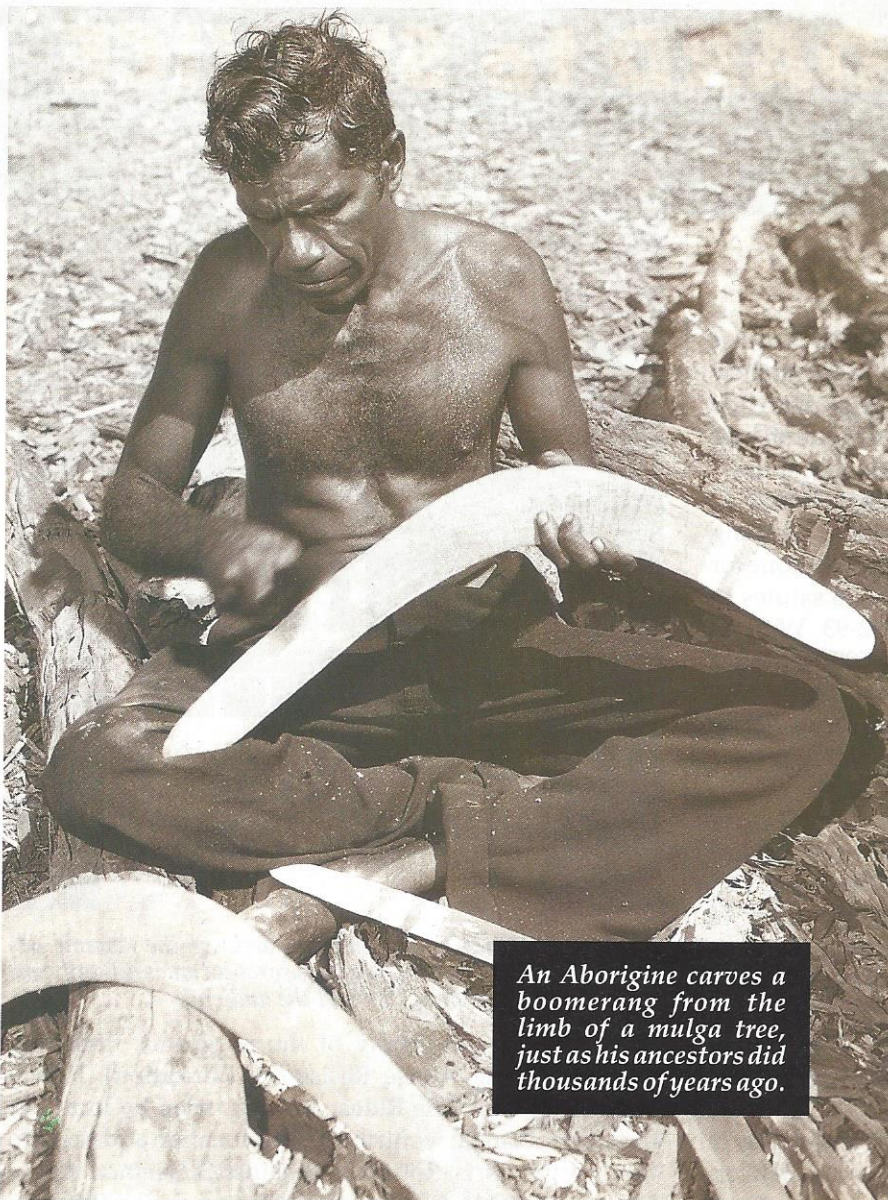
Boomerangs today have a new role—in the sports arena. Morris Maxwell, my Melbourne mentor, and his brother, Dennis, are the founding of-



AUSTRALIAN TOURIST COMMISSION

An Aborigine assists a tourist in the fine art of throwing a boomerang.

woodpieces flew in a curving path, experimented with the design and shape of the missile to increase its distance and accuracy. Australians maintain it was the Aborigines who first discovered that lengthening the shorter wing of the hook-shaped weapon would cause it to circle back to the thrower. Thus, if the boomerang missed its quarry, such as a flock of birds over swampland, it could be more easily retrieved. Predictably, when a throwstick winged outward—then mysteriously reversed its pattern of direction—some believed



An Aborigine carves a boomerang from the limb of a mulga tree, just as his ancestors did thousands of years ago.

ficers of the Boomerang Association of Australia. They helped establish the Annual National Championships at Albury, N.S.W., which awards trophies for distance throwing, accuracy of return, and consecutive catches.

Fervent Australian fans have sanguine expectations that boomerang-throwing will one day become an accepted international event at the Olympic games. Clubs and organized competitions have sprouted in the U.S.A., United Kingdom, Germany, The Netherlands, Switzerland, and New Zealand.

The U.S. has seen a "boom" in boomerangs, with serious competitors entering the "Boomerang Nationals," an annual "Throw-in" held

in different states and sponsored by the United States Boomerang Association. Although the boomerang-slinging rivalry is keen, a lighthearted mood prevails at the three-day gathering.

Ben Ruhe, a former public relations employee at the Smithsonian Institution and now the "presiding elder" of American boomeranging, is the prime mover of annual boomerang jamborees. He pioneered international competition by leading a U.S. team to Australia in 1981, where the brash Yanks defeated the expert Aussies much to the chagrin of those Down Under.

Since then, international competition has grown considerably with the so-called "World Cup" matches attracting more countries each year. Al-

though the U.S. still dominates the event, Germany's dynamic team of hurlers has displaced Australia as a close second best.

In the boomerang Hall of Fame, the holder of the world's record distance throw (in a tournament) is an American, Jim Youngblood of Massachusetts, with a throw of 134 metres (146 yards). Christian Jabet, of France, claims a longer throw, under controlled conditions, of 149 metres (163 yards).

The boomerang has undergone an amazing metamorphosis in its flight from Stone Age to Space Age. It's come a long way from the time when Australian Aborigines trimmed a curved limb of a mulga tree, fluted its upper surface with an adze, coated it with red ochre, and let it fly.

Today's boomerang lore is filled with stories of left-handed, right-handed, and ambidextrous models made of fiberglass, styrofoam, aluminum, or Lucite ("the see-thru-merang"); boomerangs with three, four and six blades; boomerangs with holes in the middle that can be caught with one finger; and boomerangs shaped like snakes, birds, and letters of the alphabet.

Boomerangs have even entered the realm of science, where "boomerang-throwing machines" provide computerized study of flight patterns at major research universities in the U.S., the U.K., and The Netherlands. Dutch scholar Felix Hess has spent seven years on an academic dissertation on the aerodynamics of boomerangs.

What has not changed over the ages, however—from primeval man to modern scientist—is the recurring sense of wonderment in watching a boomerang sail skyward, spin, loop, and home in on the thrower. It's astonishing behavior for what is still basically a bent stick thrown away.

• *Boomerang aficionado Jack Goldfarb is a free-lance writer based in New York City. His articles have appeared in The Washington Post, The New York Times, and The Christian Science Monitor.*

[View boomerangs and other unique artifacts of Australian heritage at the 1993 R.I. Convention, to be held 23-26 May in Melbourne, Vic., Australia. See pages 55-56 for a convention housing/registration form.]