

THE QUEENSLAND TIMBER INDUSTRY

Early History and Development

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The early Queensland timber industry is something of which very little has been written.

I have no doubt that as soon as the first settlers were put ashore in this country, the sound of the axes would have been heard, clearing the land and providing shelter for the First Fleeters.

In my search for articles written about the timber industry I came across one written by F. Corkling in 1905 and published in Steele Rudd's magazine. Although the article is cynical I believe that it will help us to understand some of the atmosphere and feelings at that time, so I propose to quote at length part of this article which was entitled *Australia's Cinderella*.

The author referred to the Australian industrial family—of that family the Pastoralist and Miner were the proud brothers, with the timber industry.

He pointed out that the multitude of the flocks and herds of the pastoralists and the number of pounds of meat he sold in London were handy missiles to bombard home critics. So the tally of ounces won by the miner were always available (on paper also) for like patriotic purpose.

"The farmer since he took to exporting butter, has graduated into respectability, and the planter despite his well-known proclivities for stealing 'niggers' for the pure delight of working them and starving them to death, was an honoured guest at any man's table."

"But," he went on, "who cares a 'dump' about the timber-getter?"

"Had the countless billions of feet of timber poured forth for generations by the forest been exported instead of used to build up the material fabric of these States, then would the magnitude of the timber industry have stood revealed to an astonished Minister of Customs, who would have fondled these colossal figures. Statisticians would have juggled with them. Editor men would have written leaders to the honour and glory of timber.

QUEENSLAND SAWMILLING INDUSTRY IN 1901

"If exported, every foot would have been recorded on the tablets of Custom Houses. The darkness and mystery enshrouding timber is partially and unofficially illuminated by the sawmillers in Queensland, who in 1901 held aloft a light to Federal Prime Minister Barton that he might behold their works. They told of mills, numbering 215, exceeding the works and factories of either meat, butter, sugar, leather or flour. The railways carried 416,000 tons of timber, as against 24,000 tons of wool and 273,000 of the products of agriculture.

"The number of employees were 9,000; this number was claimed to exceed the employees of any other industry. The axe, adze, saw, and manual labour timbered their thousands of miles of railways, bridged their thousands of miles of roads, erected their thousands of miles of fencing.

"Travel over the whole wide surface of Australia, and everywhere you will behold the handiwork of the bush worker in house, shed, stockyard and mine," said the author.

"The Australian may live in a wooden house, in a wooden town, walk on a wood paved street, travel in a wooden carriage over wooden sleepers and wooden bridges; ship his goods from wooden wharves, shear, refine and manufacture in wooden sheds, enclose his land in wooden fences, and look forward to making his exit in a wooden coffin, and yet remain blind to the tremendous significance of all because he has not read it in print.

"One would conceive the cup of the timber-man hungry of social distinction, would be thus full to overflowing, but space yet remains for further drops of gall. The man of letters ignores the man of timber. Prose and verse know him not.

"Has not the timber-getter rights equal to the stockman's or prospector's to win applause by deeds of derring-do; to die to slow music, or sleep in an unknown grave beneath the wattle's shade? But never is he given a show. Yet man to man he is their peer, with arms as strong, breast as rugged, beard as husky.

"Girdling his moleskins with a surcingle of leather, suspending a leather pouch for the accommodation of his baccy and waterbury.

"The lurid language should satisfy the most fastidious reader. The number of souls he verbally consigns to the bottomless pit, would if patent convert Hades in a veritable pit of congestion.

"He redeems months of sober strenuous toil by painting the township red."

EPIC OF CONQUERED DIFFICULTIES

Mr. Hancock said he believed the human side of the industry was an epic of overcoming difficulties which, before the days of mechanisation made the feats they accomplished in moving the giants of the forests and cutting them into timber almost unbelievable today.

These men pushed out beyond the fringe of society to obtain the timber required—at first cedar, but later many species.

The value of Red Cedar was recognised by the earliest of our settlers who before the close of the 18th century, were exploiting the cedar then growing in the Hawkesbury district. In 1802, the Governor prohibited the cutting down of the cedar without his special permission. The *Government Gazette* of 1825 required all persons desirous of cutting cedar to obtain permission in unlocated grounds to make application to the Colonial Secretary without delay in order that the cedar grounds may be duly apportioned. Notice was given that any vessel or boat bringing cedar to Port Jackson will not be allowed to begin to discharge her cargo until the master shall have reported his vessel or boat to a naval officer and shall have declared on *oath* the quantity of cedar or boards, the place at which it was shipped, whether cut on located or unlocated grounds and if on located grounds the name of the proprietor.

HARD LIFE OF CEDAR CUTTERS

The cedar cutters lived extremely hard and lonely lives. It was always surprising to the speaker to find the tracks of the cedar getters and the old cedar stump in the most inaccessible places.

The record told of the cedar getters moving in 1840 from Illawarra and Shoalhaven to the Northern Rivers district, where they found plenty of cedar. District after district was opened up by the cedar getters. Coomera followed from the Northern Rivers and slowly the pattern followed to North Queensland.

Because the bush lands were wanted for farms, no effort was made to protect the re-growth of cedar, and now it was so scarce in the living tree that all forms of cedar furniture were regarded as antique.

The story of cedar and the cutting down of the forests to provide grass for the farmers would apply to much of their forest lands. Australia, by overseas standards, was never richly endowed by nature with unlimited timber resources. The way good timber stands were cut down and burnt to pro-

vide pasture made a sorry story. The timber man always resisted this wanton waste but his call was not heeded.

Now that Australia was producing or would produce two-thirds of the nation's oil requirements, timber imports would be by far the highest drain on their overseas funds.

I do not want to give the impression that if the timber lands had not been thrown open for closer settlement we would have all the timber we want today. By proper use and reforestation started much earlier we would now be saving in the years to come thousands of millions of dollars in overseas funds.

SCANDAL OF THE ATHERTON TABLELAND

Many instances of forest being cut down and burnt could be told of almost every district. The Atherton Tableland is the biggest scandal of them all.

The discovery of cedar in this area belongs to the tin scratchers who reported enormous amounts of red cedar. Big gangs of Kanaka labour were brought to the Tableland to exploit the cedar.

The plan was to dump the cedar logs into the Barron River and float them down during the wet season. The floods left the Tinaroo Gorge with millions of feet of cedar and below the falls decorated with matchwood fragments of these logs, some of which were nine feet in diameter. The estimate is 10 million feet lost.

No thought was given to any other species and so the Atherton country was thrown open to selection. This appalling waste of our best timbers is one of the darkest spots in the history of the State.

I hope I have conveyed the picture to you of the lone voice of the timber man who could not make the government of the day conserve the forests. The control of the forests was always under the Lands Department and, politically, the farmers and graziers were too strong. Today, when pastoral leases can be changed to freehold, the timber industry pays close attention to see that any useful stands of timber are protected.

SOME FAMILY HISTORY

At this point in my paper I would like to tell the story of my family who started in the timber industry in 1868.

They arrived in Australia on 5th November 1856, after a good passage in the ship *Winifred*. It was the first voyage of this iron ship of about 1,700 tons. There were 500 souls aboard.

The food was good, fresh bread was baked every third day.

The highlights of the voyage were the sighting of an iceberg. A man fell overboard and the first mate dived over and, despite a freshening breeze, they were picked up.

One sailor fell from the rigging to the deck and was badly hurt.

The sailors enticed some single men to climb as far as they could on the rigging and then tied them there as a laughing stock.

On another occasion, the sailors got to the grog, got the pumps going and flooded the single men's quarters, and would not stop until they saw swords and pistols in the hands of their superiors.

This is typical of many sailing ship stories, but interesting when read from the family diary.

After landing in Sydney, the family went to Parramatta and from there went seeking gold at Burrow, somewhere out from Yass.

They returned from the gold diggings—because they did not like the characters there—with about £100, and carried it under their armpits—a system they learned from the Chinamen—to foil the bushrangers.

FARMING OUTSIDE IPSWICH

Leaving Sydney in the early 1860's they moved to Pine Mountain outside Ipswich. Farming there, they report that the lettuce and cabbage, carrots and parsnips that grew were destroyed by grubs. Corn was very successful.

Cotton produced in 1868 was priced at 2d per lb at the cotton plantation, 2½d per lb by Cribb & Foote and 2¾d per lb. by Pettigrew. This made a bale of cotton worth about £7/10/-, which was not worth the effort of producing it.

This has little to do with the timber industry but the poor return from farming forced the two sons, Josias and Thomas Hancock, to set out for the Gympie goldfields to try their luck.

This turned out to be the start of family interest in the timber industry. The two brothers had, at odd times in the various jobs they had undertaken, pulled a pit-saw. At Gympie, after staking their claim to find the gold, they needed some timber and of course set out to pit-saw it themselves.

DEMAND FOR TIMBER IN GYMPIE

This created a demand by others in the area requiring timber and while they sought the gold the demand for timber kept them busy.

The letters tell of getting 15/- per 100 feet and that by working hard they could cut 135 feet daily, besides all the

difficulty of cutting down and getting it on the pit and marking out. They returned from Gympie with enough money to buy a 4 h.p. engine which was installed in Ipswich to cut timber and from this they developed and got a 10 h.p. engine and again a 12 h.p. engine.

In reading this, it sounds like easy work, but in reality the hardships the family had experienced in getting established from the time they arrived in Sydney were almost unbelievable.

From the purchase of the first engine, despite ups and downs in the good years and the bad years, the business expanded.

Sometime in the 1880's the brothers split up the partnership; one kept the family firm in Ipswich, the other moved to Brisbane.

BUSINESS STARTED IN BRISBANE

The Brisbane business started by Josias Hancock grew and probably became the largest timber business in Australia by the late 1920's.

I joined the firm in 1927 and found that there had not been much change in the industry. Bullocks were used to snig and haul the logs to the sawmill driven by the old horizontal steam engine. One thing was happening, however. The motor lorry was making its presence felt by hauling the logs from the forest ramps to the sawmill in the country or to the rail-head for town sawmills.

The logs were loaded on to the truck body—trailers had not been developed. Needless to say, this ugly load on unmade roads often got into trouble and I remember many times seeing the bullocks hitched on to the lorries to get them out of the bogs.

Before continuing my experiences, I would like to describe the bush sawmill.

SAWMILL SETTLEMENTS AND MARKETING

These settlements were placed in the thick of good forests with a good water supply. The old steam engine was the power unit and the sawdust and mill waste provided the fuel.

The Forestry Department assessed the royalties for the timber on a basis of the cost of extraction of logs to the nearest railway siding plus the freight to the market which was a provincial city or Brisbane.

When the logs were converted to timber in the country, there was a saving in freight because, in the case of pine, there was a loss of approximately 25 per cent in sawdust and edging and in hardwood 50 per cent loss.

This meant a saving of freight in getting the sawn timber to market by the railways, which was the only method of transport allowed.

The savings were not 25 per cent on pine or 50 per cent in the case of hardwood, because of a different schedule of freight rates between log timber and sawn timber, but were considerable and so allowed the country mill to be an economic proposition.

These country mills supported a small community and played an important part in opening up the country.

INCREASING PROBLEMS

From 1927 onwards, conditions which proved to be world wide seemed to deteriorate towards the depression.

At this time, the timber industry became very much at logger-heads with the Forestry Department who were trying to extract more and more royalty from the industry, who in turn found the ever-mounting costs affecting their business and the impact of imported timbers being cheaper, production had to be curtailed. Finally, in the 1930's, most mills were either closed down or working part-time.

The opposition of the industry to the Forestry Department finally came to a climax with the change of Government under Mr. Forgan Smith. With his Lands Minister, Mr. Percy Pease, he decided that it was essential to get the industry moving again because it was such a large employer of labour.

They removed Mr. E. H. F. Swain, who was Director of Forests, appointed Mr. V. Grenning as Director of Forests and also Mr. Geo. Duffy as liaison officer to the industry

CONCESSIONS IN ROYALTIES

Certain concessions in royalties were made so that timber could be exported and, generally, by working with the Department and the change in the economic situation, the industry gradually got moving again.

In the conversion of logs to sawn timber, there is a wide variety of classifications and sizes which must be understood by the sawyer converting the logs, so that the timber is cut to correct specifications, otherwise it would mean economic ruin for the sawmiller. At this time, the early 1930's, it was not possible to sell all the products from the best part of the tree, mainly the butt log. Previously it had been converted into v-jointed timber for panelling rooms. A change was coming in architecture for larger panelling.

To utilize the butt logs, the industry turned to peeling instead of sawing the logs and converting the veneers into plywood.

THE PLYWOOD INDUSTRY

This new industry to Queensland, born in the depression years, soon found itself fighting for its very existence. The government of the day, under Mr. Forgan Smith, passed legislation setting up the Queensland Plywood Board under the *Primary Producers' Marketing Act*.

The Plywood Board soon stabilised the industry and it became a very large industry within a few years.

Returning to the timber side of the industry, about 1937 it was realised that in order to protect the industry and prolong its life, the amount cut each year must be limited and the *Timber Licensing Act* was passed. This meant that before a mill could operate, it must hold a licence, which allowed it to cut a specified amount daily.

Needless to say each mill applying for a licence claimed more than its share.

Licences were issued which in total meant that if each mill cut each day the amount shown on the licence, our forest resources would be depleted all too quickly.

QUOTA SYSTEM

A quota system was then set up, based on the average of the three years before 1937.

You will now see that a clear picture of the future of the industry was possible to ascertain the life in each forest area.

This system worked well and carried on through the war years, and is still being used.

The exception to this was when the Hanlon Government, being under strong political pressure after World War II, to allow many others to put up sawmills to meet the demand for timber for homes, granted private licences to those who could convince the Forestry Department that they had sufficient private timber to start a sawmill. Many abuses came about during this period. Timber was supplied which was inferior and, very often, when timber should have been supplied properly seasoned, it was supplied green.

This, together with the use of secondary timbers which were prone to Borer, led to the passing of the *Timber Users Protection Act*, which placed the responsibility on the saw-miller of treating the timber according to certain prescribed specifications.

TIMBER QUOTAS REDUCED

The quotas of timber were reduced at times to mills because the supply was inadequate. The natural sequence of events would have been to allow mills to pool their licences within set zones to allow for a larger throughput from mills

essentially modern, and to eliminate uneconomic ones. This was not allowed by the Forestry Department and consequently, the practice forced on the industry meant inefficient and costly operations and, because of the price-fixing policy of the Department, for they would increase the royalties to adjust for any price rise, the industry generally was a poor one with bad working conditions and poor wages for the employees.

Evidence of this was given to two Timber Commissions set up to make inquiries after the war but the policy was not able to be changed.

Only this week I read that the Government has agreed to reverse this policy. This will now allow the release of capital energy and resources for the construction of modern centralised mills. It just shows how difficult it has been to make the Government to understand the industry's problems.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE INDUSTRY

In dealing in a short paper with the ramifications of the timber industry, I can only touch on the highlights. I look back on my association with the industry as being very closely allied to the many changes which took place in the last 30 years. These include the change from bullocks to the motor lorry and the lorry and trailer, and the advent of the tractor about 1934, electricity reaching out to the country, eliminating the steam engine.

The plywood industry was developed in conjunction with the C.S.I.R.O., and also with that body the kiln drying of timber and many associated problems were overcome. Then there was the work with the Standards Association and the more systematic marketing of timber products, particularly the Queensland Plywood Board.

In the war period came its demands on the industry, the manpower regulations, price fixing (although, basically, timber under the system of royalties is always under some price fixing), and, finally, under Timber Control. The products the industry furnished during those years are remarkable.

They range from butts of rifles to the frame of the Mosquito Bomber, battery plates, boats, cases, and so many other items too numerous to recall.

RE-AFFORESTATION

Finally, I must mention re-forestation. In a humble way it was started seriously about the 1930's and has progressed in varying degrees according to the allocation of funds from year to year, until today Queensland has 162,977 acres of Australia's, I million acres of Softwoods.

This is very small for our future needs, when it is realised that the sawn timber, veneers, hardboards, chipboards, and even plastics and paper pulp all depend on the products of the forests.

In touching on some of the aspects of this industry and considering that so little is written about it, I would suggest that consideration be given to inviting papers or lectures of other persons to deal in more detail with some of the issues I have touched upon tonight.