

SOME EARLY FOREST ACTIVITIES IN W.A.

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The first Western Australian laws covering the sandalwood industry, timber cutting and bushfires, date back to the earliest year of the Swan River Colony - long before there was a Forests Department. In the years up to the 1890's these laws were administered by the police.

This early legislation was not intended to protect or conserve the forests, but rather to raise revenue and to protect private property.

Probably the first bushfires legislation was "An Ordinance to diminish the Dangers resulting from Bush Fires" which was proclaimed in 1847. This provided for the conviction of persons who wilfully or through carelessness set fire to the bush between the first day of September in any year and the first day of April in the following year. However, it permitted "the occupier" to light fires in the prohibited period, providing such fires did not extend beyond the limits of his property. As some graziers held leases over very extensive tracts of land it seems that they were still free to burn out vast areas of forest in the hottest, driest months of the year.

The penalty for breaches of the ordinance was a fine not exceeding £50 a very heavy fine in 1847. Of course it would have been most unjust to have inflicted such a heavy fine on aborigines, since members of that race had little or no understanding of British Laws, and for thousands of years had been free to burn the bush as they pleased. Besides, they had no money to pay fines. So in their wisdom, and undoubtedly out of a sense of justice, the law-makers of that time decreed that natives - and lads under sixteen - found guilty of lighting bushfires in the prohibited season might, in lieu of a fine, be publicly flogged receiving any number of lashes not exceeding fifty.

Entries in early police records show that policemen sometimes rode out into the bush to warn natives and sandalwood cutters against setting fire to the bush. Usually this followed a complaint, or an expression of concern, by graziers fearful that their runs might be burnt out.

Sandalwood cutting seems to have been the chief forest activity in the earlier years; most of the sandalwood coming from areas which are now no longer associated with that industry; mainly Great Southern districts. Policemen issued sandalwood licences, and a typical entry is this one from Eticup Police Station records of 1870 -

SANDALWOOD LICENCES

Sawyer 8/8/70 to 8/10/70	5/-
W. Grovan 15/9/70 to 14/11/70	5/-
J. Bates 1/10/70 to 31/11/70	2/6
C.S. Donovan 1/10/70 to 1/11/70	2/6

Jarrah sawlogs and sandalwood were among the first official exports from W.A., but perhaps an even earlier, though unofficial, forest-produce export was firewood. In February 1857 at least twelve New England whalers were anchored off Busselton, all engaged in trade with the settlers; selling just about everything the settlers required - crockery, glassware, nails, rope, clothing, candles, brooms, wire, brandy, apples (dried presumably), tobacco, slush oil, shoes etc., and in return buying beef, potatoes, onions, pumpkins, dairy produce and firewood. Customs records show that all the ships took on firewood, mostly from ten to sixteen cords each, for which they paid 10/- per cord.

The whalers frequented most of the bays around the South-West coast: Geographe Bay, Flinders Bay, King George Sound, Two People Bay and Esperance Bay were especially popular with them. Before about 1842 no customs duty was collected at these outer ports and consequently there are no official records of whalers' visits; but it was said that nearly 300 American and French whalers were operating along the south coast of Australia in 1841, and American whalers are known to have taken at least £30,000 worth of oil off the West Australian coast in 1837.

Whaling along the south coast of W.A. was pioneered by a Launceston based ship early in the century and it is known that American and French ships worked land-based Bay whaling operations in W.A. at least as early as the 1830's; and probably even earlier. One of these of which there is some record, was the French ship "Mississippi", the crew of which was engaged in Bay Whaling near Esperance when they assisted John Eyre in 1841.

Though there are no records to prove it, we can be sure that all the whalers which visited the South-West coast, took on supplies of firewood for the purpose of rendering down the whale blubber: an operation which was performed on board the whalers when at sea. It is likely too, that some of them obtained masts and spars, especially from places like Nornalup and Walpole Inlets.

A timber company was formed at the Vasse in 1849 and soon after that milling became an important industry in that district. Mr Henry Yelverton is credited with having built the States first steam powered mill at Quindalup. His first mill constructed in the 1850's was close to the Quindalup beach where he also erected a jetty, but a few years later, probably about 1860, he moved his mill some distance inland, closer to the forest, and ran a wooden railed railway line from it down to the jetty. It is not clear whether the first mill was steam powered or not, but certainly the second one was.

Other mills - or "timber stations" as they were called then - were built by the W.A. Timber Co. at Lockville, near Wonnerup - where the company also erected a jetty - and at Yoganup, out in the hills about 16 miles from Busselton.

Most of the workers at these mills were exconvicts, both expireses and ticket-of-leave holders. The T/L men had to report to the police whenever they changed employment or moved from one district to another. They were sometimes engaged in loading timber ships from the jetties, but they were not permitted to work on the ships or to go on board. No doubt for fear they might hide away on the ship, or be hidden by the crew, and so escape from the colony.

On their frequent visits to the mills the police kept a close check on mill workers. Sly grogging was quite rampant on the timber stations from time to time, and had to be put down. But, there were what we would now term "forest offences" to be attended to also.

On a visit to the Quindalup mill in 1876 Police Constable Carroll discovered four ticket-of-leave men cutting firewood on Crown Land, without having first obtained a licence. The constable rode back next day armed with a summons for each of the men to appear in court. Unfortunately the outcome of these cases was not recorded.

On June 6, 1874 P.C Kelly of Busselton wrote to Sub-Inspector Dyer of Bunbury.

"I beg to state for your information that the Resident Magistrate has instructed me to warn Teamsters employed on carting timber for the W.A. Timber Co. that they must take out Timber Licences and if they neglect to do so the R.M. has instructed me to prosecute them for removing timber off Crown Lands without a licence. These instructions are issued in consequence of an opinion given by the Attorney General to the effect that Teamsters employed in carting timber away from a pair of licenced Sawyers or Fallers ought to be licenced also. I intend to proceed to Yoganup on 22nd inst., to carry out the instruction of the Resident Magistrate."

On June 23 P.C. Kelly laid charges against teamsters, charging them with removing timber from Crown Lands without a licence. The cases were heard before the Resident Magistrate W.R. Bunbury and J.G. Bussell esquires, and to the amazement of P.C. Kelly, all were dismissed.

The bench gave no reason for dismissing the charge. "It could not be for want of proof" wrote Kelly to Sub-Inspector Dyer "because the defendants admitted the charge of removing timber off Crown Land without a licence but pleaded that they had a right to do so."

However in November of the same year Lance Sergeant Back found several teamsters at Yoganup removing timber without a licence. Most paid Back for licences, but one named Tyler refused and was charged and fined £1-1-0 and ordered to take out a licence.

In another incident at Busselton in 1860 P.C. Newett seized 683 posts and 1083 rails which two timber cutters had split for a local grazier without having obtained a licence. The offenders were fined 20/- with 11/- costs and the rails and posts were forfeited to the crown.

For some time prior to 1896 forest activities had been administered by the Lands Department, but in that year a new department, the "Department of Woods and Forests" was created under the Minister for Lands. Mr John Ednie-Brown, a forester of world-wide experience, was appointed Conservator of Forests and took charge of the new department.

Ednie-Brown was responsible for the appointment and training of W.A.'s first forest rangers and timber inspectors and after he died in 1899 the Department continued on under Mr C.G. Richardson, who was not a trained forester, but had been chief clerk of the Department under Ednie-Brown. It was not until 1916 that another trained forester was appointed. The new appointee Mr C.E. Lane-Poole was made Inspector-General of Forests and later when the Forests Department was formed he became its first Conservator.

In 1903 there were seven forest rangers spread very thinly over the state. They were the Inspecting Ranger, Patterson, stationed at Chidlow Wells, Inspector Fitzgerald at Waroona, Forest Rangers, Brockman at Donnybrook, Willmott at the Warren, Williams at Collie, Kelso at Coolgardie and Penna (or possibly Pennell) at Menzies. Earlier three other rangers had been retrenched, one of them had been at Katanning looking after the old sandalwood area, one at Northam - the first sandalwood inspector - and the other at Southern Cross looking after mining timber. The Public Service Commissioner considered they were unnecessary.

The rangers' duties included preparation of all applications for conditional purchases in forest areas, homestead farms and grazing leases; applications to ringbark were referred to them for approval so that they could examine the land to see that no valuable timber would be destroyed. They had to issue licences, collect fees and royalties, control boundaries of leases, crown land and government reserves, and administer the Act and regulations generally. The Inspecting Ranger in addition to controlling his own area had to regularly inspect the other rangers' work.

The area controlled by each man was quite vast. Before the appointment of Willmott, Brockman's area covered the whole south-west of the Brunswick River, inland to the Great Southern Railway and right down to Albany. In 1903 the area south of a line between Bridgetown and Margaret River was handed over to Willmott. Even then Brockman's territory contained 7 mills and over 200 sleeper cutters. He had had up to 300 sleeper cutters and 10 mills to control, yet more than half his time was taken up with conditional purchase inspections and surveying lease boundaries.

The annual salaries of some Forestry Officers in 1903 were:- C.G. Richardson £300 (the same salary as Ednie-Brown had received), Inspecting F/R Patterson £220, F/R Kelso £180, F/R Brockman £170. The other rangers salaries ranged between £160 and £170. The nurseryman at Hamel received £225.

There were also several timber inspectors. One of these was a former convict who had been transported to Australia for murder and who, after his release, in a fit of rage killed another man for insulting his wife. He again escaped the gallows, being sentenced to only six months imprisonment because of strong provocation.

Before becoming a timber inspector he had worked in a mill at Sawyers where sly grogging was very prevalent. This former convict went to the mill manager and suggested he support an application for a licenced hotel. The manager did so, the licence was granted, sly grogging ceased and the mill crew became more sober and less troublesome. As a sleeper inspector he tried hard to do away with cutting sleepers on the quarter, but much to the relief of the sleeper-cutters he was unsuccessful in this.

When the Forests Department was formed some of the forest rangers mentioned here were absorbed into it and so became our first foresters. Old records can tell us much about the early days of forestry and the timber industry but they tell us very little about the sort of persons these men were.

Recently in a conversation I had with Dick Perry he described Forester Fitzgerald. It was a most vivid description and told me much more about the man than all the records could. Perhaps Dick and some of the other retired foresters can be persuaded to write something about those "old-timers" for Forest Notes.