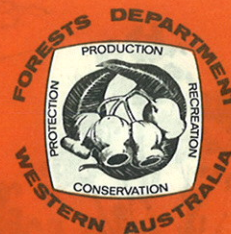




INFORMATION SHEET

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THE SANDALWOOD TRADE

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Sandalwood, as found in Western Australia, is a shrub with the botanical name *Santalum spicatum* and from this is obtained an aromatic wood which has been valued by the Chinese for hundreds of years for use in religious ceremonies. It is used mainly in a powdered form for the manufacture of the well-known joss sticks, which are burnt as offerings in their temples. It also has uses as a cosmetic in Burma and for other purposes in the Far East. An aromatic oil can be distilled from the sandalwood and this is used mainly as a fixative in the manufacture of perfumes. It was valued medicinally until the advent of penicillin.

This shrub is parasitic and requires a host plant to live on, usually one of the many wattles (*Acacia* species). The shrub was found by early colonists to be very widely distributed over the inland parts of the country generally known as the wheatbelt, Eastern Goldfields and Murchison. Nowadays it is only found in any quantity in the Eastern Goldfields and Murchison.

The first recorded export of this commodity was in 1845 by the early farmers of this State who took up land on which sandalwood grew. They were able to pull the wood and sell it for export and so were able to buy stores while they developed their farms. It is certain sandalwood was exported from the Swan River Colony prior to 1845 from the Port of Fremantle, but the first record shows a sample of four tonnes was shipped from Fremantle to Colombo on the *Vixen*, a schooner of 44 tonnes, in 1845.

By the end of 1846 32 tonnes had been exported at a value of \$640. In the year 1847 there was a dramatic increase and the export figures showed 436 tonnes of sandalwood to the value of \$8880 were exported. The following year, 1848, there was another dramatic increase when 1359 tonnes were exported. Unfortunately this did not continue and there was a slump from 1849 until it again reached a peak in 1861, when the recorded export was 2670 tonnes valued at \$49890, and it continued at a high level throughout the '60s. It is interesting to note that in 1868 the other timber exports were valued at \$1276 while sandalwood was \$52090! Most of the wood in those times was exported through the ports of Fremantle, Bunbury and Albany.

The sandalwood export trade continued at a reasonable level throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century and into the present century, with the production averaging about 3000 to 4000 tonnes per annum. By 1920 a recorded value of \$7535956 of sandalwood had been exported from Western Australia—a lot of money for those times.

In the early 1920s there was over-production and huge stocks accumulated at Fremantle and in China. The trade had to be regularised. In 1929, the Sandalwood Act was passed and in 1930 four exporting firms were amalgamated to form the Australian Sandalwood

Company Ltd. In 1932, the Sandalwood Export Committee was formed, which regulated the production and export of sandalwood. Both the company and committee are still in existence today to continue the policy.

Sandalwood is exported in the form of logs, roots and butts, pieces, powder and shavings. The demand has fluctuated and the Sino-Japanese and Second World War interrupted the trade.

From the early 1940s production has not exceeded 1000 tonnes per annum except in 1973 when just over this quantity was exported. Over the years, annual export quantities have varied tremendously, from about 400 to 14200 tonnes per year; the annual quantity exported during the period 1845 to 1973 averages 3450 tonnes, which has a total recorded value of \$19149069.

Prior to 1919, sandalwood and oil distillation was on a small scale only and originally was produced from sandalwood obtained from the north-west of the State. During the period 1929-68, exports of the sandalwood oil varied from 1800 to 5897 kg per year. Very little oil is now exported.

Mention has been made of the help sandalwood was to the early settlers. Later in the present century, sandalwood production played a very important part in the gold-mining industry. Many prospectors were also sandalwood pullers and, if they had no money to continue prospecting, they would utilise their knowledge of the bush and the location of sandalwood to obtain permits to pull, clean and haul loads of sandalwood. The proceeds from this would be sufficient to buy stores and provisions for another period of prospecting for gold.

The sandalwood is pulled out of the ground, not felled or cut down, because the roots, butts, stems and branches are all valuable. The wood was originally cleaned down to the heartwood with an adze; nowadays it is cleaned by removal of the bark. When cleaned it is ready to be railed to Fremantle, where it is trimmed, sorted and packed for export, mainly to the expatriate Chinese in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaya and Burma.

In the early days, camels and horses were used to pull the stems out of the ground and transport it back to the camp in drays to be cleaned and stacked, ready to be transported to the railhead by bullock teams. With the effluxion of time, four-wheel-drive vehicles and tractors are used for the pulling, trucks transport the cleaned wood, and today the wood is loaded on rail containers for transport to Fremantle, where it is prepared for export.

The life of a sandalwood producer always has been, and still is, very hard. Their living quarters were originally just canvas sheets or tents. Water was very scarce and they only had Coolgardie safes to keep the perishable food. Nowadays, usually caravans are used as living



Sandalwood puller's camp. Note the horse's feed up on stilts to keep it clear of inquisitive sheep, etc.

quarters, with the advantage of refrigerators. However, water is invariably scarce and sometimes has to be transported long distances to the camps.

The pullers rise early, in the cool of the morning, to go out and locate the wood to be pulled, and usually plan to have sufficient wood back in camp to clean the morning's pulling before boiling the billy for lunch. They go out again for a second load in the afternoon, which they have cleaned before nightfall. They hope to have sufficient for a rail container load of between four and seven tonnes ready within a fortnight to be taken to the nearest railhead. Opportunity is then taken to replenish stores, water and provisions, before returning to the bush. Many only work for about nine months of the year, as, in the hottest months of the year, it is extremely arduous work in the very harsh climate of our inland areas where sandalwood is still available.

The story of sandalwood is very much part of the history of Western Australia. Next time you pass down the Stirling Highway in Perth, with its fast-moving traffic, and see the present Albion Hotel, remember it was once known as the Half Way House and at times in the late nineteenth century had up to 20 laden wagons of sandalwood outside. The Albion provided a welcome resting place for the labouring horse teams and thirsty teamsters. In the Eastern Goldfields, many of the old sandalwood camps with the tell-tale heap of sandalwood chips can still be seen.

Sandalwood, which was originally obtained from the Spice Islands (Indonesia) in the second century A.D., was first exported from Australia nearly 130 years ago and is, to this day, still being exported. This was very much part of our past in Western Australia, and when we realise it is still shipped from Fremantle it is a very strong link in our history.