

Historic Trees of Western Australia

by Len Talbot

Trees have featured prominently in the affairs of Western Australia right from the very founding of the Swan River Colony; and not just in the usual ways in which trees are used in most societies, but in some novel ways as well. Over the years since the first

European settlers arrived, legends have evolved around particular trees, and officials have found all sorts of odd uses for others; but by far the most interesting and amazing stories concern the uses ingenious bushmen have found for some of them.



The Foundation Tree

Perhaps Mrs Dance started it all when she struck the first blow to the tree that was felled to mark the foundation of Perth in August 1829. This was, indeed, an unusual way to herald such an auspicious occasion. It would have been more in keeping with tradition to have celebrated the event with a volley of musket fire, a salvo of ship's cannon, the raising of a flag and the reading of a proclamation — or perhaps by turning the first sod of earth. Today, of course, it would be more fitting to mark such a happening by *planting* a tree.

In the Old Gaol section of the Perth Museum there is on display a small work-box made of sheoak wood. An inscription on the lid of the box reads:

This Box Was Made
From The Tree
Which Was Cut Down
At Swan River in 1829
By His Excellency
Sir James Stirling
For the Purpose of
Laying The Foundation
Of The Capital Of
Western Australia

Queen Mary found this box in a curiosity shop in London in

1932 and, realising its significance, she purchased it and presented it to the Perth Museum.

The site of the Founding Tree is marked by a brass plaque set in the Barrack Street footpath near the Perth Town Hall.

Whether or not Mrs Dance is in some way or other responsible for triggering off our unusual association with trees we can only surmise, but, what is certain is that, ever since that time trees have featured in some novel ways in our history, in our folklore and in the lives of our pioneers.

Half-Way Tree

Another early official use of a tree was that of the Half-Way Tree on the road between Perth and Fremantle. In the early days of the colony mail carriers between the two towns met at this big gum-tree to exchange mail bags. In official correspondence and in tenders called for mail carrying contracts it was referred to as the Six-Mile Tree. It continued to be the meeting place for mailmen until 1867. Eventually, when it was cut down, a pillar-box with a plate on which the history of the tree was outlined was erected near Vacluse Street, Claremont, to mark the spot where it stood.

Courtesy Baitlye Library, 1194P.



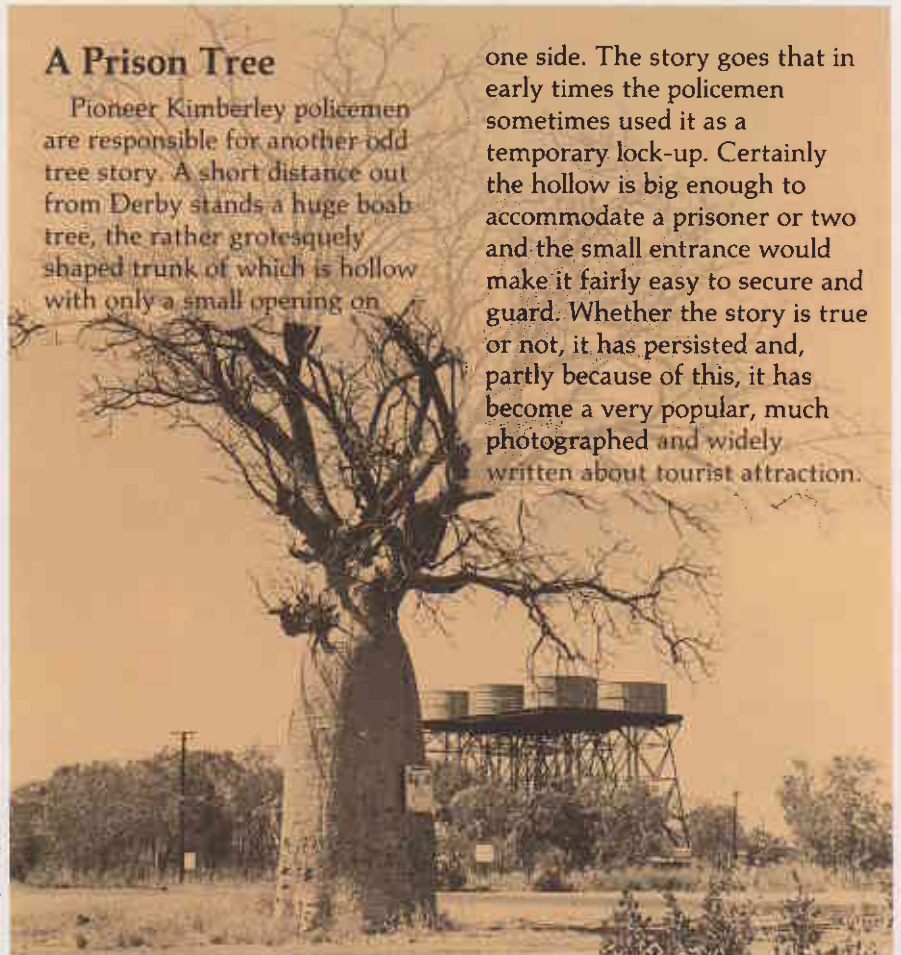
The Hanging Tree

A more bizarre story is that of the Hanging Tree. This tree, which stood near the eastern end of the Perth Causeway, was used as a gallows until the new Perth gaol was erected in 1855.

In an account of a journey between Perth and York a visitor to the colony in 1870 described it as 'an old paperbark tree bereft of leaves', and added that it was said to be haunted by Malcolm's ghost.

A man named Malcolm was hanged on the tree for the murder of a basket-maker. There were people who believed he was not guilty and when the tree died not long after his execution they interpreted this as proof of his innocence. No doubt from this stems the legend of his ghost haunting the tree. Apparently the tree remained standing and was a landmark for many decades after it had died.

Courtesy Baitlye Library, 3219B10.



A Prison Tree

Pioneer Kimberley policemen are responsible for another odd tree story. A short distance out from Derby stands a huge boab tree, the rather grotesquely shaped trunk of which is hollow with only a small opening on

one side. The story goes that in early times the policemen sometimes used it as a temporary lock-up. Certainly the hollow is big enough to accommodate a prisoner or two and the small entrance would make it fairly easy to secure and guard. Whether the story is true or not, it has persisted and, partly because of this, it has become a very popular, much photographed and widely written about tourist attraction.

John Boyle O’Rielly’s Tree

A more delightful story, although it has a sad ending, is that of John Boyle O’Rielly’s Tree near Picton.

O’Rielly was an Irish poet and one of the Fenian convicts transported to the Swan River Colony in 1868 after an abortive uprising in Ireland. In 1869 he was attached to a road gang working in the Picton area. On the surveyed line of a road which the convicts were clearing stood a beautiful big marri tree. O’Rielly was very taken with the beauty of this tree and appealed to the warder in charge of the gang to spare it by diverting the road around it. The warder was adamant that as the tree was growing on the surveyed line it had to be removed. Then, in the words of O’Rielly’s biographer, J. J. Roche, ‘He went, this absurd poet in a stupid suit — to the Commander of the district, and pleaded for the tree’.

It seems the Commander did not immediately grant his request but, being amused by the audacity of this convict approaching him over such a trivial matter as the sparing of a tree, that evening related the story to his wife. She was quite intrigued and asked to be shown the tree herself. When she saw it, she too was immediately captivated by the magnificence and beauty of it and pleaded with her husband to spare it. Of course he did, and the ‘Imperial road’ was diverted and the tree left standing.

O’Rielly escaped from Western Australia aboard the United States whaler *Gazelle* late in 1869, and in the United States became well known as a poet and as editor and owner of *The Boston Pilot*. He was also instrumental in organising the escape from Fremantle Gaol in 1876 of six of his Fenian friends still incarcerated there. The story of their escape aboard the whaler *Catalpa* is one of the classic escape stories of all time,



Courtesy South Western Times

preserved for posterity in several books and in one of our better known folk-songs.

Much of O’Rielly’s early writing in America was based on his Western Australian experiences, including the poems ‘The King of the Vasse,’ ‘The Dukite Snake’ and ‘The Amber Whale’. He also wrote a novel called *Moondyne* about convict life in the south-west. This book had run to a dozen editions up to 1891.

For almost another century, O’Rielly’s great marri with its wide-spreading crown was one of the biggest trees along the South Western Highway. On October 24, 1951, it was cut down by employees of the Bunbury Municipal Council. A conference between officials of the Council, the Main Roads Department and the State Electricity Commission had decided that it was a menace to the heavy traffic on the road. To be fair to them, it must be mentioned that in latter years the tree’s foliage had become depleted until there was little of it left. When it was cut down the butt was found to be rotten. It was at that time no longer the magnificent giant that had so impressed O’Rielly.

In the more recent years before its destruction, it had become known as Moondyne’s Tree and the credit for saving it had passed to Moondyne Joe. However, the original story had been recorded in J. J. Roche’s *Life of John Boyle O’Rielly* published in America in 1891, the year of O’Rielly’s death.

In America, O’Rielly’s grave is preserved as a national monument and his home as a National Museum.

Gloucester Tree

The most amazing of our tree stories comes, appropriately enough, from the karri country, where the sheer grandeur of the giant trees might be expected to inspire in people out-of-the-ordinary ideas. This certainly has been the case. Two of the better known cases concern feats of unusual engineering ingenuity.

Of all the forest fire look-outs the Gloucester and Diamond Trees are the best known, though several others were used in the same way. These include the Gardner, the Boorara and the Big Tree look-outs.

When organised forestry was first introduced to the karri region in the 1920s, one of the most immediate problems was the implementation of a fire protection programme, and an early warning system.

This problem had been solved in the more northern jarrah forest by constructing a series of watch-towers on high hills. The towers overlooked the surrounding country and were connected with each other by a system of bush telephone lines. The tallest of these towers was about 38 m high. In the karri forest, where many of the trees reached 80 m or more, the construction of suitable towers presented a much more difficult and more expensive problem.

Resourceful foresters met the challenge by selecting tall trees growing on high points and converting them to look-out towers.

(cont. overleaf)



Choosing the right tree entailed the use of climbing irons to scale 60 to 70 m into crown for a test of the view — certainly no feat for the timid or for vertigo sufferers. A suitable tree was selected, and the top branches were then lopped off, leaving a three- or four-pronged fork to form the foundation on which to build a small hut.

These branches, some of which exceeded 50 cm in diameter, were chopped off by an axeman. He stood, legs astride on the limb, and chopped through it in the same way as thousands of city folk see log-choppers cutting through logs in contests at the annual Royal Show.

Today, tourists standing in the safety of the cabin at the top of Gloucester Tree can feel the whole structure sway in the wind — quite a pronounced movement in a good breeze. Imagine then the skill and courage of the axeman who had to maintain his balance 60 m and more above the ground, especially during the whiplash effect created when a big limb, weighing several tonnes, was suddenly cut away from one side of the tree.

To provide access to the look-out for the fire-watcher who was to work there, and who was

not necessarily as daring — or perhaps (as he may have put it) as foolhardy — as those who had constructed it, a spiral ladder consisting of wooden pegs about a metre long with tapered ends driven into holes bored in the trunk was constructed around the bole of the tree. These pegs were spaced about a metre apart and shorter iron spikes were driven into the tree between them to form each alternate rung. To give the climber some feeling of security, another row of pegs was added above and parallel to the rungs and a flimsy looking wire arrangement was run between the outside ends of both rows to form a 'safety' frame.

Today the Gloucester and Diamond Trees are used primarily as radio repeater stations for the Department of Conservation and Land Management's radio communications network. They are only used as fire look-outs when spotter aircraft, for one reason or another, are unable to provide satisfactory coverage.

Each year thousands of tourists can view these trees from ground level and hundreds climb the Gloucester Tree. They now rank among the major tourist attractions of the area.

One Tree Bridge

The One Tree Bridge which spanned the Donnelly River, 20 km west of Manjimup, was a renowned landmark in the area for over half a century.

It was constructed to provide access to a graphite mine on the west side of the river. The graphite had been discovered by a geologist named Walker in 1899, but before it could be mined the problem of getting the ore across the Donnelly River had to be overcome. The mine was not a big show and the quality of the graphite had still to be assessed, so there was

a reluctance to go to the expense of constructing a conventional bridge. As there was no suitable ford nearby either, development of the mine seems to have ceased for some time.

In 1904 the problem was solved by two local bushmen, brothers Walter and Herbert Giblett. Some little distance upstream from the mine site (where the banks were about 24 metres apart) they selected a suitably tall karri tree and felled it across the river. This required considerable skill for, although the tree was about 1.8 m in diameter at the butt, there was

the likelihood that the log would shatter when dropped across such a long span. Just how it was successfully accomplished no-one seems to know. It has been suggested that it was just good luck, that it was felled when the river was in flood so that the water would cushion the fall, and that it was felled so that big limbs hitting the ground first would take the brunt of the shock.

Across the top of the log, which was used as a giant single-stringer, sturdy bearers were secured and split-plank decking was laid lengthwise to make a platform 2.4 m wide. To

try the bridge out a team of 12 bullocks pulling a load of three tonnes was driven over it. Subsequently, the first load of 65 tonnes of graphite was shipped to England in 1906.

In 1933 the original decking was destroyed in a bushfire. The Manjimup Road Board tested the log, found it was still sound and had a new decking laid. It continued to serve the district as a road bridge until a new one was built in 1942 and then was replaced again in 1957.

The original bridge was salvaged from a flood in 1956, and part of it remains on display at a picnic spot on the banks of the river near the new bridge.



Courtesy Baitye Library, 2034B

Charlie Young's Home

But, surely Charlie Young has given us our oddest tree story of all. Charlie came to Western Australia from the United States aboard a 'Yankee' schooner. He deserted at Albany in the early 1860s and some time later he accompanied Pemberton Walcott to the Warren River area. Here he found employment and stayed, first with the Brockman family and later with the Scotts on their Donnelly River property. His job was to mind cattle and sometimes to drive a bullock wagon laden with potatoes and other produce to the Vasse. His pay was a pound (\$2) a month plus keep.

Charlie saved his money and invested it in cattle until he had accumulated a small herd of his own. In 1878 he took up a block of land himself at Mica Hill and it was to here that he brought his young bride — Mary Thacker from the Swan Valley — to live the first years of their married life. Their home was a huge hollowed-out karri tree in which a daughter, the first of their seventeen children, was born.

There are differing accounts of Charlie's home. One in the WA Historical Society's *Journal of*

Proceedings states that it was a huge fallen karri tree. However, a 1921 newspaper account gives a somewhat different version.

In 1921 journalists accompanying Premier James Mitchell on a tour of inspection of the recently launched Group Settlement Scheme farms, 'discovered' Charlie at Manjimup. He was then an 81-year old veteran of the Warren District and something of a bush philosopher. In any case he was a 'character' and good copy for reporters. This account of Charlie's story appeared in the *Western Mail* about that time:

... He selected his present holding and the couple lived in the hollow of a mammoth tree — the monarch of the forest. There the first of his 17 children was born. Under one side of the tree was a piggery, under the other side a dairy. The king karri has long since gone the way of all hollow trees but its outlines remain and even according to modern ideas any enterprising land agent would feel himself justified in describing it as a 'commodious one roomed residence' ...

This is by no means an exhaustive account of Western Australia's historic and unusual tree stories (see *Forest Focus* No. 28). However, it is an interesting account and it may inspire people to record for posterity others less known and encourage them to do what they can to protect trees of historic interest so that, unlike some of those referred to here, they might be preserved for future generations to enjoy.



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Harmony of nature and civilization: mother and joey on the lawn in the morning light seem to symbolize . . .

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No other national park reflects the changing attitudes to conservation and land management over the years than does Yanchep, 53 km north of Perth on the coastal plain, and one of the oldest of WA's parks. Established in 1903 for 'Protection and Preservation of Caves and Flora and for a Health and Recreation Pleasure Resort', Yanchep reveals a series of developments that are generally not contemplated in national parks being established today.

Entrance to the park immediately gives the visitor an impression of a garden. Graceful lemon-scented gums, planted by children as an Arbor Day tribute

Cover — Looking west over Groper Bluff towards Cape Riche on the south coast of Western Australia.