

*Many areas in the south-west of W.A. are laden with reminders of the past.*

*All of these hint at the life and death of a myriad of tiny mill towns which sprang up in the wake of a vigorous young timber industry, and, as the resource waned, faded away.*

*As people flood back to the forest in the 1980s, seeking a sense of space and the peace of the forest, many of these areas are becoming a focus for their recreation.*

*The cynical would say that green grass, and running water, reminiscent of England, are more in keeping with most people's idea of getting back to nature than is the harsh reality of the jarrah forest. A forest where often the softest thing to sit on is a zamia palm, and the greenest place to pitch a tent is a nice dusty piece of cleared gravel.*

*Nonetheless a hint of history also provides a sense of place: a feeling of context and familiarity which makes the forest experience relevant to people who lead a primarily urban lifestyle.*

*These 'hints of history' can often form the basis of on-site information displays. Designed and written to interpret the environment, the displays can create a sense of place which lead a reader to new discoveries and new understandings of the interaction between human society and the natural world.*

*At Nanga, in the Murray Valley near Dwellingup, the theme of new life in the midst of past disaster has been taken up for a display soon to be installed on site. Helen Fordham takes us back to look at . . .*

## A Town Like Nanga



*Photo courtesy, Baitby Library.*

Sunlight filters through the trees, flooding clearings. The stillness is tangible. The ground is thick with pine needles and the plants riotous in colour. It is hard to imagine this place as a fire-blackened wasteland stretching over thousands of acres.

But on Tuesday the 24th January 1961 hundreds of terrified people stood helplessly by and watched as fire destroyed Nanga Brook — a timber town with a population of over 60 families. Situated 9 miles from Dwellingup, Nanga was one of numerous mill settlements that existed throughout the south-west during the early years of the century. Miraculously no lives were lost, but the total bill for destroyed property exceeded \$50 million. In one night a vital chapter in W.A.s timber milling history ended as Nanga, Holyoake and Dwellingup were incinerated.

## The Mill

Timber was taken from the Nanga Brook region from as early as 1898. In 1902 a lease was granted to 'Millars Karri and Jarrah Company' to establish a mill on the banks of the Murray River. The Nanga mill was the biggest timber centre in the area for many years. It could produce 55 loads of timber a day, most of which was exported. Timber was taken out of Nanga by the bush railway via Yarloop to the docks at Bunbury.

Initially over 100 men worked at the mill; it was very much a family affair, with sons following fathers into the business. Work was extremely hard and the day was long. In 1919 the men worked a 48 hour week for 10½p (30¢). Accidents were frequent and it was not unusual for a mill hand to be minus a few fingers. Despite the dangerous work, only four deaths were recorded during the 50 years of the mill's operation.

Nanga Brook, along with



Photo courtesy Batty Library

Above: Timber was taken by railway to Bunbury.



Photo courtesy Batty Library

Charlie Warrilow (left) and Clarrie Simmonds cut a caper on the old Nanga bridge.



Right and Below: Costumes might change but summer pleasures are still the same.



Photo courtesy Batty Library

other Western Australian milling communities, was severely affected by the First World War. Production dropped off and with only five people left to operate the mill, it was forced to close between 1914-1919. After the war and throughout the 1920s, production improved until the depression when the mill closed for several months.

Life was difficult during this period. Food was expensive and people had to survive on seven shillings (70¢) a week per family. Many of the mill hands left Nanga never to return and production was reduced to one sixth of its former level. The Second World War saw mass

enlistment and the mill was forced to function on half crew. In 1941 the mill burnt down; arson was suspected. Apparently the destruction of a barely functioning mill was not uncommon when timber resources in the area had declined.

A much smaller mill, a 10 loader, was built which needed only 16 people to work it. This considerably reduced employment prospects and very few mill workers returned to Nanga. Production remained low and the mill was forced to change from railway sleepers to general purpose cutting during the late 1940s. Basically, Nanga Mill was running out of


supplies. They had exhausted the region and the mill was facing increased competition from the Dwellingup Mill.

## The Townsite

The Nanga townsite came into existence in 1909. There was a store, butcher's shop, hall, billiard room, school —although in 1923 only six children attended. By 1940 this had increased to 100 and the town had acquired three tennis courts and a sports oval. Millars company virtually owned everything, even the houses. These were rough 4-6 roomed affairs made of jarrah board with galvanized iron roofs. The facilities were very primitive. There were no bathrooms, instead an open tub was used in the wash-house and water heated in coppers. Nanga had 56 homes in the main town along with 12 single men's huts and a boarding house that accommodated 20.

## The Future

Nanga Brook continued to function throughout the 1940s and 50s, but she was slowing down unable to compete with Dwellingup. In 1961 the Dwellingup fire incinerated the town and devastated the countryside. In 1962 the Governor General declared the town of Nanga Brook would no longer exist. The area was replanted with pines by the Forests Department and has become a popular camping and picnic spot.

The peace and solitude of Nanga Brook make it difficult to imagine it as a thriving milling community. The remains of Nanga's past are still visible. The rambling brick footpath that leads nowhere, the rusty fencing wire and occasional protruding pipe, the wild fruit trees and the crumbling charred chimney stacks. She has lain dormant until now when thousands of visitors flock each weekend to enjoy her tranquil beauty. Nanga Brook is coming back to life. 

Nanga is enjoying a renaissance as a popular camping spot.



# Landscape

Volume 1, No. 4  
March 1986

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Published by the Department of Conservation and Land Management, 50 Hayman Road, Como, WA, 6152.

*Landscape* replaces *SWANS* and *Forest Focus*.

Editor: Liana Christensen

Designer: Trish Ryder

Photographers: C. Bryce, B. Lane, G. M. Morgan, K. Morris, B. & B. Wells, B. Wilson, C. Winfield.

All Maps by Department of Conservation and Land Management Mapping Section.

Page preparation Typographix — Perth

Offset plates by Photolitho-PM.

Printed in Western Australia by the Government Printing Office ISSN 0815-4465.

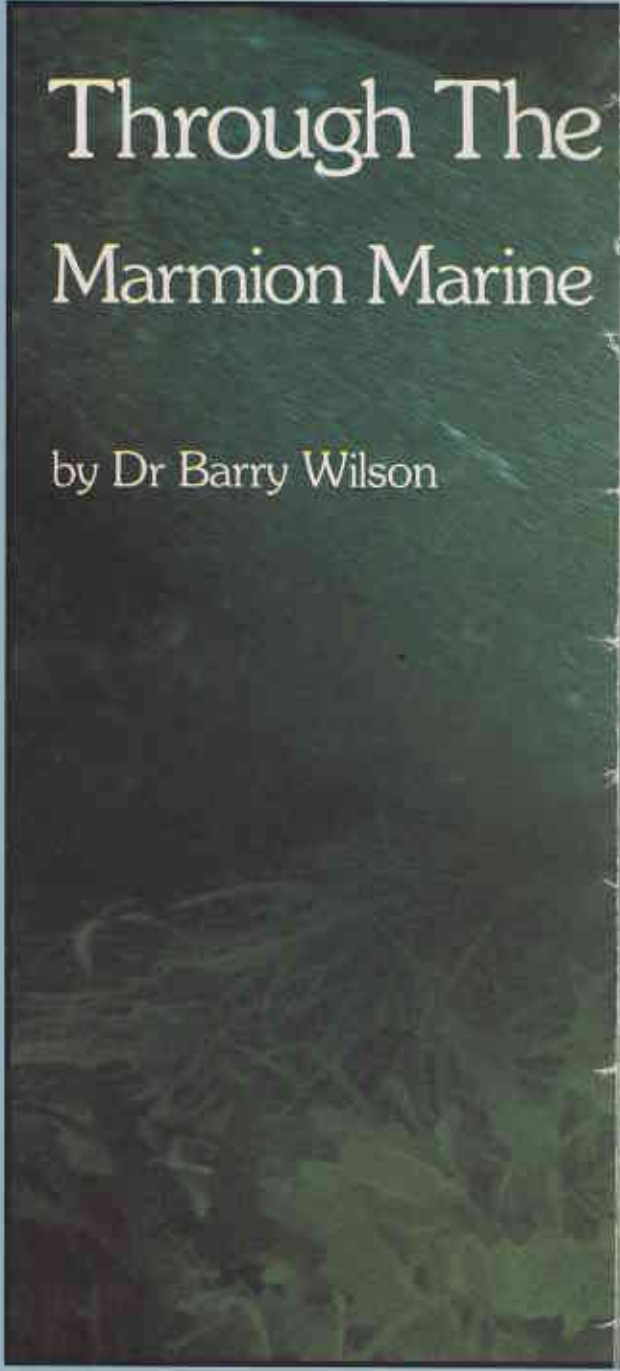
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### Cover

The Caspian Tern (*Sterna caspia*) is a good advertisement for the value of islands (see article p. 25). It breeds on islands all along W.A.'s coast from Recherche Archipelago in the south to Lacedpede Island near Broome.  
Cover photo by Cliff Winfield.

# Through The Marmion Marine

by Dr Barry Wilson



To the land-bound observer standing on the dunes of the Whitford Nodes, on Perth's north coastline, the surface of the sea beyond may be still or turbulent, but it is always two-dimensional. It is hard to realise that below the surface, on the other side of the mirror, is a three-dimensional counter-world, with varied relief and diverse habitats. This world is populated by an alien array of the most impossibly grotesque and stunningly beautiful creatures, in such abundance and variety as to leave a snorkel-diver breathless in more ways than one.