



# Gimlets and Gold – The story of Kalgoorlie's woodlines

Story & Photographs by Cliff Winfield

Think of forests in W.A. and you picture the green south-west; think of Kalgoorlie and you conjure with gold, not trees. But the green and gold are inseparable. The trees that kept the hearts of the mines pumping were cut from native forests miles from the goldfields and hauled along specially constructed bush railways. These railways were known as THE WOODLINES.

Wood was needed for the steam-driven winders that hauled the ore to the surface, the generators that gave the cities electricity, the pumps that brought the essential water from Mundaring, and of course for home cooking and heating.

Without the salmon gums and gimlets of the goldfields, the miners would have had to move timber from the south-west in massive quantities to support the thousands of kilometres of shafts and stopes under the ground.

Before long, the area about 15 km radius from the mines was cut out and it became

uneconomical for men with horse and cart to supply the fuel. A few entrepreneurs set up companies equipped with railways, and teams of cutters, loaders and carters.

The woodlines began forging out from Kalgoorlie. In 1903 the W.A. Goldfields Firewood Supply company (WAGFS) (one of three supplying firewood and structural timber to the mines) had 60 km of railway and telephone line, four steam locomotives, a sawmill to supply sleepers milled from salmon gums and a small town to support the company. The main camp was based at Kurrawang 10 km south of the city.



Two steam trains worked around the clock ferrying the timber to Kamballie on the outskirts of Kalgoorlie. There it was distributed to the mines and other consumers along a government railway encircling the main mines and service industries. The trains would return to the spurline after a round trip of up to twelve hours, and deposit a rake of empty trucks which the loaders would fill from stacks.

Loading was by far the most onerous task on the woodline as some of the logs that had to be lifted by hand onto the trucks were 1.5 m long and weighed over 100 kg.

There were occasional strikes for better rates and conditions. Some of the stoppages brought the whole goldmining industry to a halt for weeks.

The timber companies employed 1500 men and supplied over 500000 tonnes of firewood and mining timber per annum — roughly equivalent to the current karri/marri chipwood operation. The other companies amalgamated with WAGFS to counter the economic pressures as haulage distances increased.

By 1937 WAGFS was hauling timber over 170 km from its main camp near Cave Hill. The operation was uneconomical, but repeated pleas to the government to open up reserves closer to Kalgoorlie were resisted by the Forests Department. The company decided to try to lessen their overheads by reducing the haul distance, taking up new permits to the east of Kalgoorlie. This also meant that the woodline trains avoided crossing the government railway, for which it had been paying a toll of fourpence a ton. But the government permit now levied a timber royalty of threepence a ton. Moving the whole base town of 70 houses, shops, a



Wood was used extensively in the underground mines.





**MAJOR WOODLINES SUPPLYING FIREWOOD AND MINING TIMBER TO KALGOORLIE SHOWING YEARS OF OPERATION**

As the sun rises on an autumn dawn, already the calm icy air is disturbed by the distant blows of axes on tree trunks and by the steam-snorting draught horses.

Looking around this outlandish settlement, in the middle of one of the most harsh and arid areas on earth, we see that most of the larger buildings are on wheels. The rest are made of flimsy hessian strung over bush poles and roofed with corrugated iron. The adult conversation filtering from behind the hessian walls is mostly Slav and Italian, yet that of the children is English.

This is the 'main camp' of a goldfields woodline. Perhaps 160 km out into the bush from Kalgoorlie, a dozen or so families and a hundred single men are out here to harvest the timber necessary to keep the gold mines producing.

The 'main camp' was where the main line from Kalgoorlie to the timber ended. Here were the living quarters for married people, the horsemen, carters and railwaymen. The 'main camp' also offered services such as the school, police station, store and drapery. All these were built onto railway wagons so they could be easily moved. Main camps might be moved every 18 months or stay in one place up to seven years.

In the 'main camp' life was hard and simple, with little or no sanitation. The hessian walls provided minimal privacy and scant protection from the elements. The only entertainment was gambling and drinking in the 'tolerated' sly grog shanties.



The 'main camp' at Burra Rock left virtually no trace.

hotel, and workshops from Kurrawang to Lakeside, 5 km on the other side of the city, was not seen as a great problem to a workforce accustomed to continually moving camp.

During World War II Italians working on the Woodline were interned. This caused a crisis in the gold industry as the woodlines could supply only a small part of wood demands. The production of gold was essential to the national economy, but without the Italians the woodlines were hopelessly understaffed. Rather than release prisoners-of-war to relieve the labour shortage, the government chose to open mining timber reserves close to the mines for firewood.

In 1942 the firewood industry was declared 'protected' by the government. This meant that it was considered as important to the security of the nation as fighting the

enemy and all involved in the industry were required by law to stay in their jobs on the woodline rather than enlist in the armed forces. This didn't ease the crisis, but it ensured that it wouldn't worsen.

At the end of World War II the WAGFS was only servicing one third of the needs of its customers. The management decided that they could no longer carry on. They suggested that the consumers should buy them out and run the business themselves. This went ahead and the State Government underwrote a loan to a consortium of mining companies and the Power Corporation (SEC), which called itself the Lakewood Firewood Company.

The Lakewood Firewood Company started on shaky ground when, almost synchronous with the consortium taking over, the Power Corporation lost its biggest consumer. Buses superseded electric trams.

Labour shortage continued to be the greatest stumbling block to regular supply.

Now, however, the flood of refugees from war-torn Europe was there to be tapped. The company used the sponsored immigrant scheme to augment their labour force. Under this program, immigrants were contracted to work for two years for the organisation which sponsored their migration. Many highly educated people from southern Europe, who had never done any physical work to speak of, found themselves forced to cut 4 tonnes of wood a day just to eke out a living.

Lakewood Firewood Company slowly began to prosper and by 1952, 550 men produced 135000 tonnes of wood for the year. But that was the last peak for the industry. Soon afterwards the Power Corporation switched at first to coal-powered boilers and then to diesel

*(continued overleaf)*

The inland of W.A. known as the Eastern Goldfields, is unique for the amount and type of vegetation that grows in such an arid climate. Of about 500 eucalyptus species Australia wide, roughly 10 per cent occur in the W.A. goldfields. Of those, 34 occur **only** in the goldfields, making the area one of the richest in eucalyptus species.

The 1897-98 Woods and Forests Department Annual Report shows that Coolgardie was one of the first places in the State to have a resident Forest Ranger. However, the Forests Act was still 20 years away and the rangers were powerless to do much more than keep the peace between the wood cutters. Thus forestry was able to remain only on a 'care and maintenance' basis with more attention given to policing the operators than to conserving the resource.

In 1926 George Brockway, a young graduate from the Adelaide University school of forestry, arrived in Kalgoorlie to take over as Officer-in-Charge. He was to remain involved in the administration of the inland forests from Kalgoorlie until 1949. He remained concerned for their conservation until his death.

Brockway brought with him a fresh view of the problems of managing and conserving the forest resource of the region. He developed a knowledge of the area that is probably still unsurpassed.

Brockway was particularly concerned about land degradation. Apart from the goldfields, he was an outspoken critic of the mass clearing of woodlands in the developing wheatbelt. He managed to marry his knowledge and



Coral gum (*E. torquata*) (above) and mottlecrah (*E. macrocarpa*) (top right) are two beautiful goldfields' gums that have become very popular with gardeners.



appreciation of the goldfields eucalypts with his concern for the land by establishing a small nursery in Kalgoorlie in 1946. The nursery raised local eucalypts from seed with the aim of distributing them in the wheatbelt. The Forests Department Annual Report of that year describes the reason for establishing the nursery:

*In clearing much of our wheatbelt, too little attention has been paid to the retention of shelter belts, woodlots, and in some instances, even shade trees. Farmers and country Road Boards are now faced with the task of repairing, to some extent, the damage wrought . . .*

Brockway's pioneer work in the cultivation of the inland eucalypts and his enthusiasm in their promotion was probably the biggest factor influencing the surge of public interest in growing native plants. His small nursery grew in stature and size. In 1955 the operation was transferred to Dryandra then later to Narrogin. The CALM Narrogin nursery still supplies trees to farmers and local authorities. In 1986, 300 000 seedlings left the nursery for planting in the agricultural and goldfields area of W.A.

George Brockway instituted many other conservation projects: perhaps one of the most valuable legacies of his foresight was the hundreds of timber reserves scattered throughout the agriculture areas. In later years many of these became Nature Reserves, and today these are a vitally important system of conservation reserves within the wheatbelt region.

The magnificent street trees of Kalgoorlie also stand as a memorial to this far-sighted forester.

generators, as did the mines. By 1962 the woodline was only producing 9000 tonnes a year, most of that was logs and timber for use underground in the mines. But even that market was diminishing. The new underground technique of leaving rock columns standing to support the stopes, had reduced the demand for structural timber drastically.

In 1965 the Lakeside woodline ceased operation, and by 1967 the railway line, engines and rolling stock were sold for scrap metal. □



Marble gum (*E. gongylocarpa*).

## What Happened To The Woodlands?

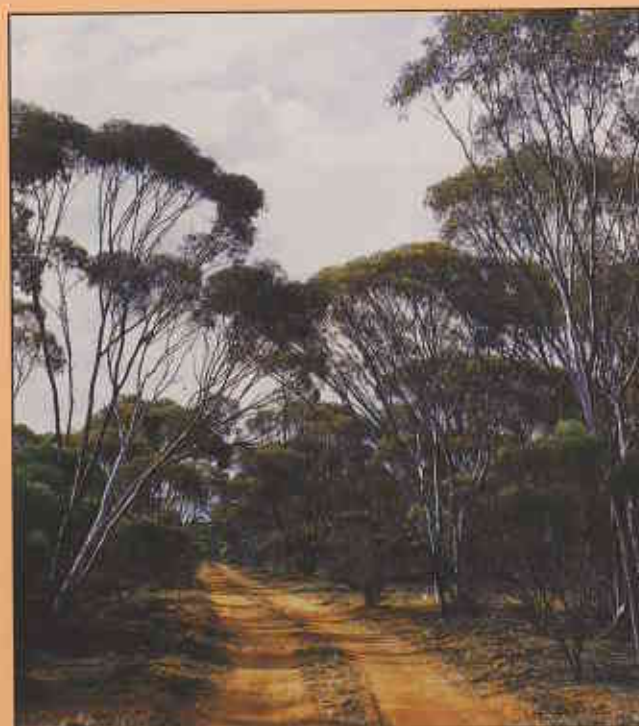
The visitor to the Kalgoorlie area may find difficulty in believing this story.

Healthy eucalypt woodland extends as far as the eye can see to the north, south and east of Kalgoorlie. With a few exceptions, the old woodline cutting areas have regenerated back to their former glory. Only the trained eye of the forester or the botanist can recognise the relative youth of today's goldfields woodlands.

But what of the evidence of the past timber harvest; the tree stumps and crowns that were not used? Termites have made short work of the branches and twigs of the tree crowns that were left behind. Tree stumps can still be seen, but not within a few kilometres of Kalgoorlie where they provided fuel for the miners' stoves.

The extensive cutting created a dearth of firewood within easy reach of Kalgoorlie. However, the ready availability of gelignite (or 'fracture' as it was so aptly known then) provided the miners with an easy way of reducing the iron-hard eucalypt stumps to lumps of burnable wood.

The exception to this success story is found on the broad drainage lines, or flats, to the east of Kalgoorlie. These formerly supported a woodland of salmon gum. Evidence suggests that the salmon gum flats regenerated as readily as the rest of the woodland, but were highly prone to grazing pressure by sheep. Those flats now support a



The regenerated woodlands.

shrubland of blue-bush. Interestingly, similar salmon gum flats to the north of the town, where grazing pressures were less, have regenerated back to salmon gum woodland.

# Landscape

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## Editorial

W.A. is a vast, sparsely populated State, and it is not uncommon to hear some parts of it described as 'the last frontier'. But there are few, if any, parts of W.A. that have not been affected by European settlement.

Evidence of western civilization in some of the most remote areas is far too often the empty can. But even where there are no obvious traces, the effects have been profound.

There is compelling evidence, for example, that the displacement of Aboriginal communities from much of inland W.A. — and the subsequent removal of Aboriginal firing practices — is directly responsible for major changes in vegetation, which in turn has resulted in the virtual extinction of many native animals.

It is not always easy to pick the effects of European civilization on the natural environment even when the history is well-documented. This *Landscape's* account of the woodlands around Kalgoorlie talks about the often horrific environmental damage, but an observer of these woodlands today would have difficulty recognizing that vast areas were clearfelled less than 50 years ago.

While the concept that we should 'let nature do its thing' has superficial appeal, the reality is that the purity of nature has been, and will continue to be, distorted by human presence. We have no option if we want to sustain the unique ecosystems of W.A. but to apply management principles.

The history and management problems of Benger Swamp, which feature in this edition, illustrates two fundamental points. Firstly, even the most disturbed areas of W.A. can make a major contribution to conservation. Secondly, we must be careful not to change a system that works even though the way it works may not be 'natural'.

As complex and as difficult as the task of understanding ecosystems is, the social and political factors which influence the type of management that can be applied are often more difficult to deal with.

The key to good management is an understanding of the processes that drive the ecosystem. Once we understand what the natural processes are, we can then devise management systems which will mimic them.

The only way to ensure that rational decisions are made on environmental management is to provide the facts.

## COVER PHOTO

Just when you thought you had seen every angle on our State symbol, photographer Jiri Lochman surprises you with a fresh perspective.