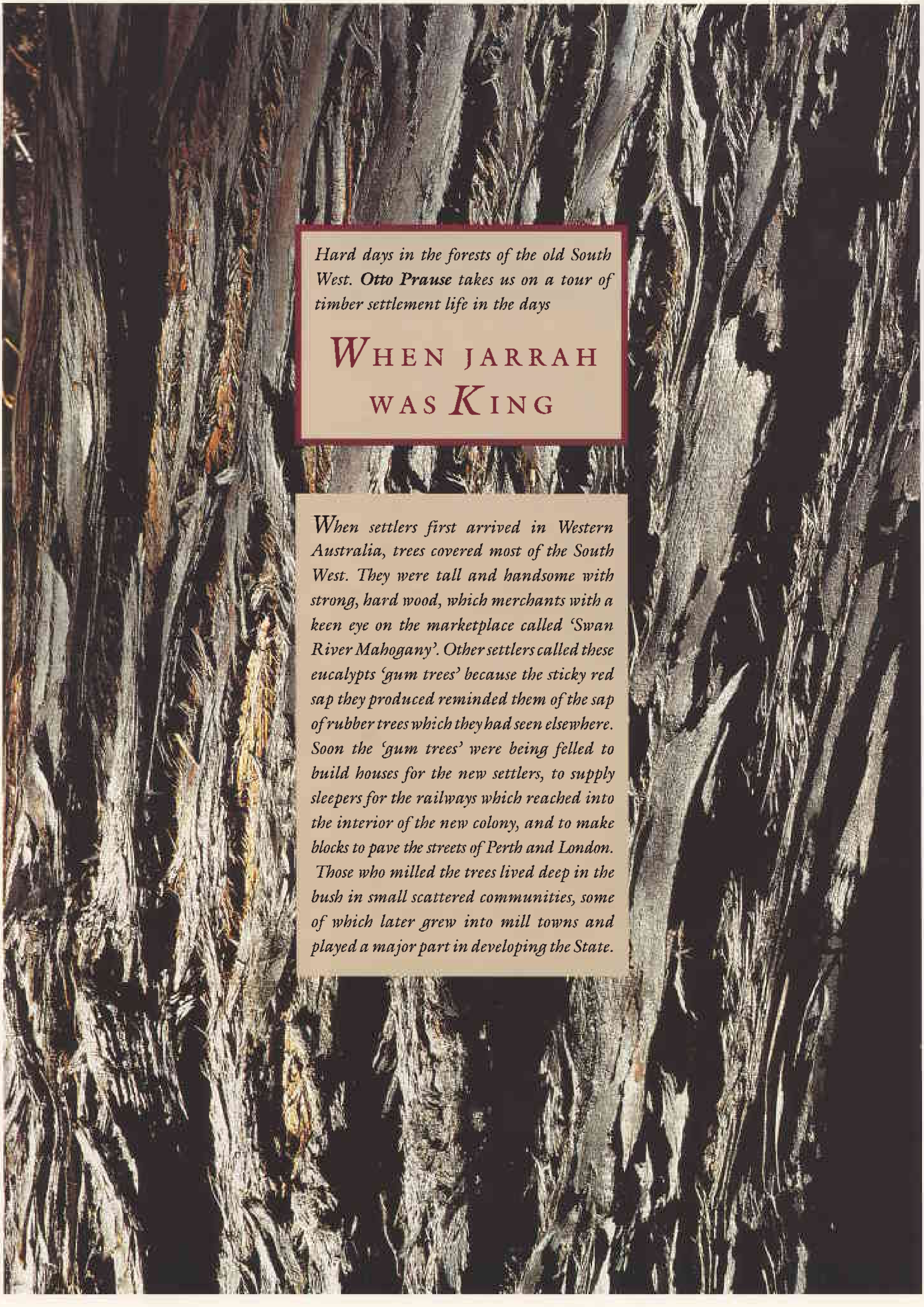


Hard days in the forests of the old South West. ***Otto Prause*** *takes us on a tour of timber settlement life in the days*

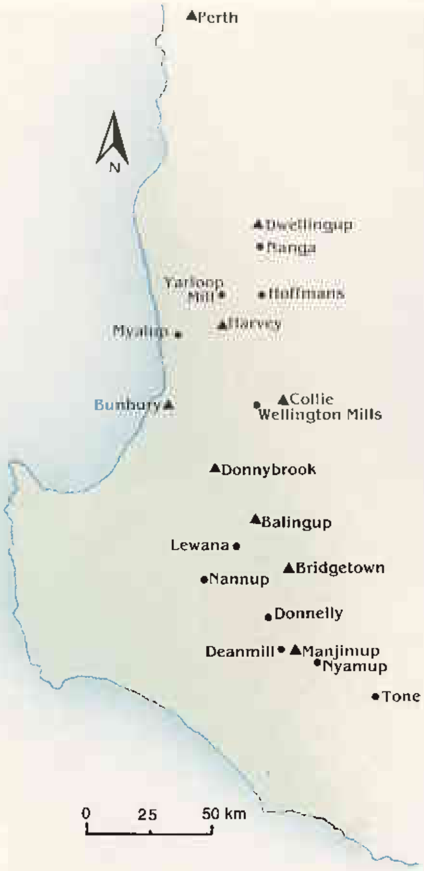
WHEN JARRAH WAS KING

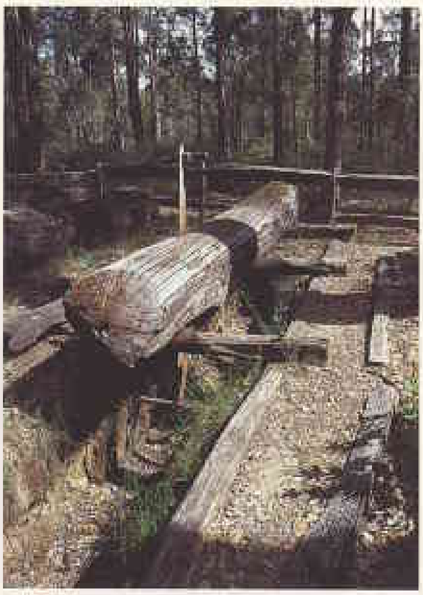
When settlers first arrived in Western Australia, trees covered most of the South West. They were tall and handsome with strong, hard wood, which merchants with a keen eye on the marketplace called 'Swan River Mahogany'. Other settlers called these eucalypts 'gum trees' because the sticky red sap they produced reminded them of the sap of rubber trees which they had seen elsewhere. Soon the 'gum trees' were being felled to build houses for the new settlers, to supply sleepers for the railways which reached into the interior of the new colony, and to make blocks to pave the streets of Perth and London. Those who milled the trees lived deep in the bush in small scattered communities, some of which later grew into mill towns and played a major part in developing the State.

During the early days of cutting hardwood, there were many small, makeshift timber operations scattered throughout the South West of Western Australia, producing pit-sawn timber for local consumption. Around them, a collection of cottages grew to house the workers. The cottages were mostly basic, temporary structures built with cast-off timber nailed together, an iron roof, and sometimes only a hessian bag for a window to keep out the winter chills. They were quickly built and just as easily demounted when the sawyers moved to another location.

The pit sawyers were mostly single men. There were no facilities for women and children in the tiny settlements, and to get there you either had to walk or hitch a ride on a 'jinker'. These were big, lumbering log-wagons with huge wheels and were drawn by teams of horses or bullocks. Everything that was needed - tools, food and drink - was brought in on them, and everything the sawyers produced went out the same way.

Soon the saw pits were replaced by steam-driven machines, and railway tracks snaked through the forest. Timber companies, some of which survive to this day, sprang up rapidly. During the early years of this century, when hardwood timber-cutting reached its peak, the mills and their attendant settlements were big and had an air of permanency about them. The houses built for their workers were much more elaborate than the earlier structures. Other services were gradually attracted to the towns: first a trader would come and open shop, then a pub, school and church would follow and establish themselves on the periphery;





This is how it all started. A restored saw pit of the type used by the original timber sawyers.
Photo - Marie Lochman ▲

Jarrah forest in morning mist. An aerial view of part of the Darling Range.
Photo - Marie Lochman ▼

Opposite page:
Photo - Jiri Lochman

and, before long, what started out as a company-owned mill town would become an actual town. From about 1920 onwards foresters and field crews of the Forests Department also became established in the timber towns. Their role was to control tree-cutting, carry out regeneration and fight forest fires. Most of our South West towns developed this way, owing their creation and existence to timber and forestry. In some areas, timber-cutting helped to clear land for farming and produced an income for the struggling new colony. The timber industry also produced wealth for some of the more enterprising pioneers who, around the turn of the century, when the industry was at its peak, built large houses for themselves and lived the life of English country squires.

World War I and the Great Depression heralded the beginning of a decline. Many mills closed and disappeared as, gradually, all that was salvageable was taken out and what was left was reclaimed by the forest. The larger mill towns - those that did not rely on timber alone for their livelihood - kept going. Other settlements shrank in size and importance. Workers' cottages stood empty, weeds invaded the flower beds and machinery rusted away. It was a fate that befell many of our once-famous mill settlements and towns: Nanga Brook, Mornington, Hoffmans and Donnelly River. Some, however, were given a new lease of life by being used for other purposes. Four of those that remain today in the jarrah forest, in an area managed by the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM), are now run by the Ministry of Sport and Recreation as school camps and holiday cottages. They are Myalup Pines, Wellington Mills and Tone River.

Myalup, located between Harvey and the coast (the closest to Perth), together with Wellington Mills, some 10 km south of Wellington Dam, started out like so many typical timber mills in the Collie-Harvey-Yarloop triangle. They were big operations and the equipment used in both places would have been similar to that now on display at the Yarloop Mill's Workshop Museum. Both mills helped to produce the timber needed by the growing domestic and export market until the late 1920s. They then became bases for the Forests Department's experimental tree planting, as there was a growing realisation that timber harvesting could not go on indefinitely without restocking and putting something back for the generations to come.

After the interruption brought about by World War II, pine planting began on a vast scale in the 1950s. The newly erected cottages, built to a State Housing Commission design, became home to many a post-war migrant family whose breadwinner was employed on the reafforestation project. At this stage the valley settlement of Lewana, on the Blackwood River halfway between Balingup and Nannup, was established on farmland bought from a local grazier.

A typical mill worker's cottage - sole survivor from an era long gone by in a forest clearing near Tone River.
Photo - Otto Prause ▼

Children at play at Wellington Mills.
Photo - Jiri Lochman ▼▼

TRANQUIL TONE

Tone River, by contrast, was a working mill until recent times. Some 40 km east of Manjimup, it was operated by a big private timber company which had obtained a permit from the Forests Department to cut and mill logs from a large tract of land beside the Tone River. The mill operated between 1952 and 1978 and was one of the last real working mill towns, others being Deanmill and Nyamup. Jane McConnell's book, *A Town Like Tone* (written for the Ministry of Sport and Recreation), draws on the experiences of former residents, and what we read about life at Tone probably applies equally well to the other mill towns. According to Ms McConnell, the town was meant to be called Strachan (pronounced 'strawn') after the farmer

The living bushland ... regrowth forest near the Blackwood Valley settlement of Lewana.
Photo - Otto Prause

who pioneered the area; but everybody called it Tone, so the name stuck. There was a sense of tranquillity about the area that persists to this day. The town itself was a pretty place with freshly painted houses, each with a picket fence in the front and fruit trees at the back. The mill was on the other side of the river, separated from the town by a screen of trees.

In the morning, the mill-hands would cross over on the swing bridge and prepare for the day's work. Very soon the air would be filled with the faint hum of the big circular saws and the muffled clatter of machinery, while puffs of steam from the Robey compound steam engine (a museum piece even then) could be seen drifting lazily through the crowns of the trees. Once the children had been sent off to school in the school bus, the women could do their shopping at the general store (which sold everything from baby food to bicycle clips), or they could dress up for a rare outing by bus to Manjimup. Nobody had a car in those days and the 40 km to 'Manji' seemed a long way. The outside world was quite remote for the people in the little bush town which, apart from the company's private line, could boast only one telephone, a public one located outside the general store.

There was an oval just behind the town, and on weekends there would be cricket in summer, football in winter. For the children, nothing could beat the river. A section of it was kept clear of snags and tree trunks to make it suitable for swimming, canoeing and general horseplay. One winter the river flooded and washed away the footbridge which provided access between the town and the mill. For weeks, the men were ferried across the river until one of the mill's leading craftsmen built a new swing bridge.

Films were shown at the community hall, which was also used for. church services with clergy visiting about once a month. One day there was a wedding - and what an occasion that was! The whole town was there, including the mill manager (the unofficial mayor), a father-figure who knew all the children by name and was always available to give advice, usually of a civic rather than personal nature. Tone was a place where everybody, including the boss, was your friend.

There was also a forestry depot at Tone, with a forester in charge of operations in the bush; and an overseer and gang of field workers to fight fires, plant trees and maintain roads, bridges and telephone lines.

Eventually, time caught up with the mill on Tone River, as it had done with others. Steel sleepers (which seemingly last forever) and double-brick houses on concrete rafts altered the community's needs for timber. Above all, however, the need for much bigger, more permanent mills in different locations meant that the usefulness of these towns came to a natural end.

But for those who wish to cast themselves adrift on a wave of nostalgia and catch a glimpse of life in a mill town, whilst sitting on a verandah watching smoke curl lazily out of a neighbouring cottage's chimney, then a visit to Myalup Pines, Wellington Mills or the town on the Tone is a must.

Although they no longer echo to the distant buzz of sawing or to the gentle click of leather on willow on a Sunday afternoon, they still retain some of their former charm and are perfect places to shake off the shackles of city life. A few days spent at any of these former mill settlements will give the visitor a fascinating insight into the age when jarrah was king. ▣

Otto Prause is a writer and photographer with an interest in Western Australian history. He can be contacted on (09) 453 6309.

LANDSCAPE

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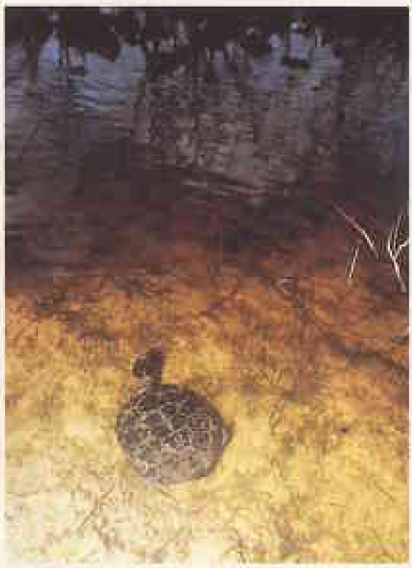
Cloud-capped Bluff Knoll, majestically brooding sentinel of the Stirling Range. Does it hold a secret in its stony heart - perhaps the answer to the missing mammal mystery? See story on page 9.



*A western swamp tortoise (*Pseudemydura umbrina*). Could this be one of the last to be photographed? Not if CALM's ten-year recovery plan succeeds. See page 28 for details.*

Mulga and fire - at best an uneasy relationship - sometimes symbiotic, sometimes disastrous. Find out when and where on page 20.

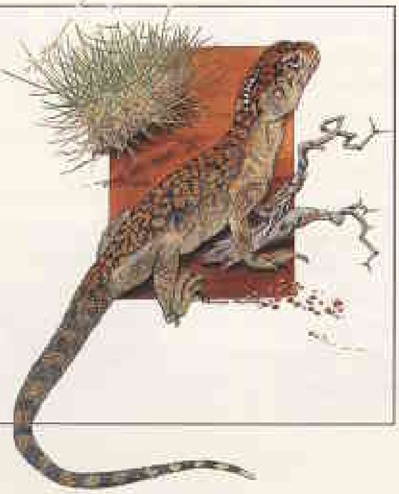
The Kimberley's rugged grandeur is deceptively fragile. Additional reserves managed by CALM help protect the region's delicate, complex and diverse ecosystems. See page 35.

An uncommon dragon, Caimaniops amphiboluriodes *inhabits mulga shrubs. Many other dragon lizards prefer harsher habitats such as rock-piles and salt lake beds. See page 51.*

COVER

*Central netted dragon (*Ctenophorus inermis*), one of the more than 60 species of dragon lizard that inhabit the arid and semi-arid parts of Australia. The acute eyesight and swiftness of dragon lizards are essential in order to avoid predators and to capture food. See page 51.*

Illustrated by Philippa Nikulinsky



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