

THE WAY WE WERE

CHANGING TIMES - WANDOO FOR TANNIN

Avril Baxter

MANY people are aware that an extract from the bark of *Eucalyptus astringens* (Brown Mallet) was used to tan leather, but few know that the extract from *Eucalyptus wandoo* (White Gum) was prized by some as the second best tanning agent to the European Chestnut tree.

Land for Wildlife members Nicola Harman and Tim Hussey have a 5 hectare property on the Hotham River at Ranford near Boddington. On this property in 1935, because of a deep permanent pool on the Hotham River, Industrial Extracts Limited established a tannin extraction plant which was to operate for 20 years and employ up to 100 people at a time.

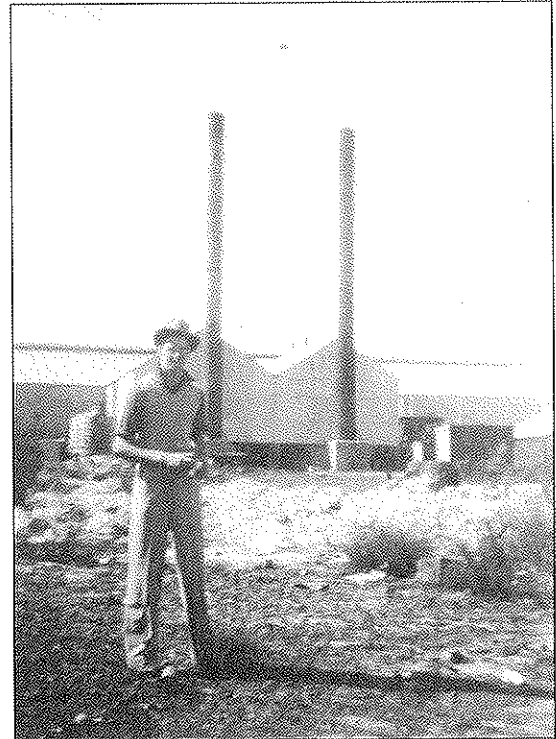
The processing plant worked non-stop and consumed up to 300 tonnes of White Gum logs per day. Logs, up to 10 feet in girth and 11 feet 6 inches long, were harvested from the surrounding countryside and fed endwise into a revolving drum like a giant pencil sharpener. Chips were leached in wooden vats, the liquor was then pumped into copper tanks and the excess water evaporated. The extract known as "Mertan" looked like Grass Tree gum. The coarser dried chips of White Gum after the leaching process were used to fuel the boilers and finer residues were used as a dressing when resurfacing tennis courts or paths.

World War Two created a heavy demand for the product resulting in Industrial Extracts Ltd. being the first company in WA to be declared a man-powered organization, the "Mertan" used for tanning leather for the military.

60 000 gallons/hour of water was needed to cool the condensers and came from the adjacent Darnminning Pool. Pumps drew the water from 20 feet below the surface and heated water from the plant was pumped on to the surface of the pool where it gradually cooled. Good quality underground water was also available and used in the boilers to produce steam for powering the plant.

In 1957 the plant was in need of upgrading, however the distance to the White Gum resources (now often more than 30 miles away) made the building of a new plant on this site uneconomic. Since then, the plant has been used as a factory for manufacturing pegs, a storage depot and a battery chicken operation.

Tim and Nicola bought the property in 1991 and made it their home. They have planted trees and shrubs every year since then and aim to have a thick tree line all around the edge of the property with shrubs along internal fencelines to encourage birds and other fauna to move between the Hotham River and the adjoining Railway Reserve.



Outside the extraction plant in 1938



The site today, note the boiler chimney in the background.

They are pleased with their success, the ground is now spongy to walk on and plants are recolonising previous bald spots and road surfaces. The place abounds with frogs, skinks, geckos and birds, and whilst Tim and Nicola state that revegetation can never replace the original bush, they are happy to revegetate an area that has had a long industrial history into a *Land for Wildlife* sanctuary.

Source: *Becoming Boddington*. Ferrell J. Shire of Boddington 1992.