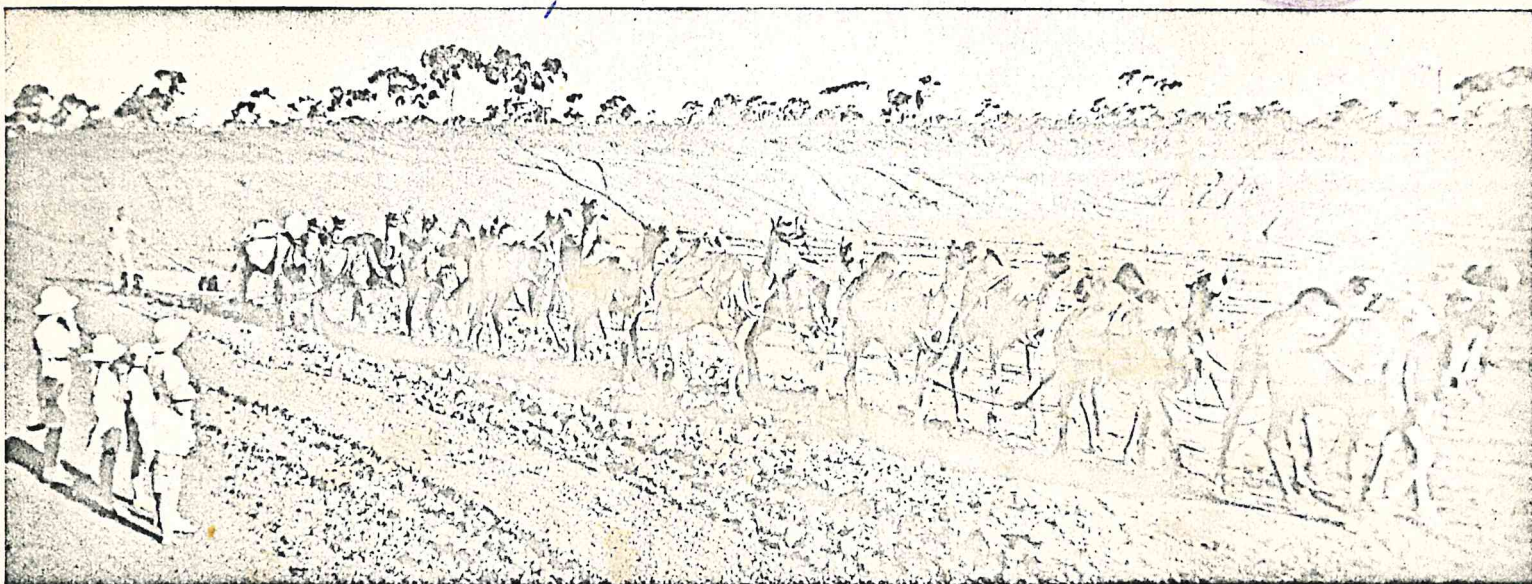


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EXCAVATING A 6,000,000-GALLON TANK TO SUPPLY WATER FOR THE WOOD-LINE.

## Fuel for the Golden Mile

The story of the Kurrawang Wood-line

By JOHN K. EWERS

WHEN we consider the mining activity of the Golden Mile during the past forty years, it becomes evident at once that there must of necessity be a colossal daily consumption of fuel. Power is needed for generating electricity, for driving huge winding-engines, and for heating the vast furnaces in which the ore is roasted. The popular conception of Kalgoorlie as a "desert city" raises the question of the source of this power. The nearest coal supply is at Collie, over four hundred miles away. Haulage costs over this great distance would probably be too great a burden even for the richest square mile in the world to bear. It is fortunate, therefore, that nature has provided an ample supply of timber within easy access of Kalgoorlie, and for over thirty years the Western Australian Goldfields Firewood Supply Company has performed the essential service of cutting and carting this timber to the mines.

The Company derives from a scheme that was inaugurated to supply water to the mines from the 42-Mile, about eight miles south-east of Ora Banda. When the Goldfields Water Supply was opened in 1903, pumping water a distance of 350 miles from Mundaring Weir, the existing rolling stock from Ora Banda was converted into a wood-line, which, later, with its headquarters at Kurrawang, became known as the Kurrawang Wood-line. The past thirty-five years have seen this line growing longer and longer, with more and more spurs, until vast areas of country to the north-west and south-west of Kalgoorlie have been denuded of timber. At one stage, the head of the line was 118 miles from Kurrawang, and it will be readily realized that, the farther the line probed into the bush, the greater was the cost of haulage.

Last year the W.A. Goldfields Firewood Company was granted a new cutting lease, with an area of some 1,200 square miles, to the south-east of Kalgoorlie, and it was deemed advis-

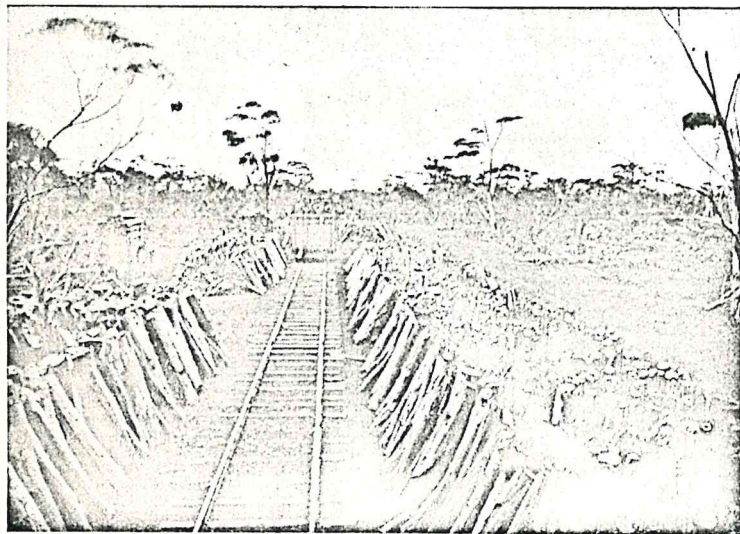
able to transfer the head-quarters of the company from Kurrawang, seven miles west of Kalgoorlie, to Lakeside, which lies a few miles to the south-east. Even so, the head of the bush-line where operations were to begin was 56 miles distant from the new head-quarters. The removal of some 80 houses, the company's offices, the saw-mill, the loco. workshops, and a hall to this new site fourteen miles away was begun early in 1938 and was expected to take over twelve months to complete. There are several advantages to be gained from this transfer. The haulage from the source of supply will be greatly reduced, maintenance costs will be halved, and, as the new line does not cross existing Government lines, as the old one did, there will be no toll to be paid.

When I visited Kurrawang in May, 1938, the place was very much "a house divided against itself." One half of it was still at Kurrawang, the other half at Lakeside. In view of this, I decided to proceed at once to the head of the line. The next "train" was due to leave at 4 o'clock the following morning. Fifteen minutes before the hour found me groping across a set of rails, through the loco. sheds to where the "train," a solitary engine, was getting up steam. My sudden emergence out of the gloom was probably as much a surprise to the train-crew of three, who were busy loading wood-fuel, as it was to me to find nothing but an engine on which to ride. However, suitcase and I were securely packed on the side of the engine. I sat on the tool-box, holding on to the handrail and wondering what would happen if I went to sleep. The cabin of the engine, as well as the tender, I should explain, was packed to capacity with wood. It was an eerie ride, that ten miles to Kamballie, in the pitch darkness of two hours before dawn, without even a head-lamp on the engine to light the way. At last, breasting a hill, we saw the lights of Kalgoorlie and Boulder City stretch-

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ing before us. Somewhat less than half of the ordinary illuminations because of the hour, they nevertheless gave the impression of a mighty metropolis in that lonely and unexpected place. Four great plumes of sulphur-laden smoke from the mines stretched horizontally over the sea of lights. I watched them, fascinated, while the engine rushed with a resounding "clank-clank" down the hillside to Kamballie.

Here we waited while a timber-laden rake of trucks approached from the head of the line. Its engine poured over



FIREWOOD AWAITING TRANSPORT.

us a cascade of sparks as it passed, and we watched it curving in to the mines and the power-house of Kalgoorlie. Dawn came while we waited for its return with an empty rake of trucks to which our engine was coupled, and then we set off for the remaining sixty miles of the trip. I had transferred myself and my baggage to an empty truck, sprung to carry ten tons of timber and carrying only my modest weight. It was scarcely possible to make up for any lost sleep.

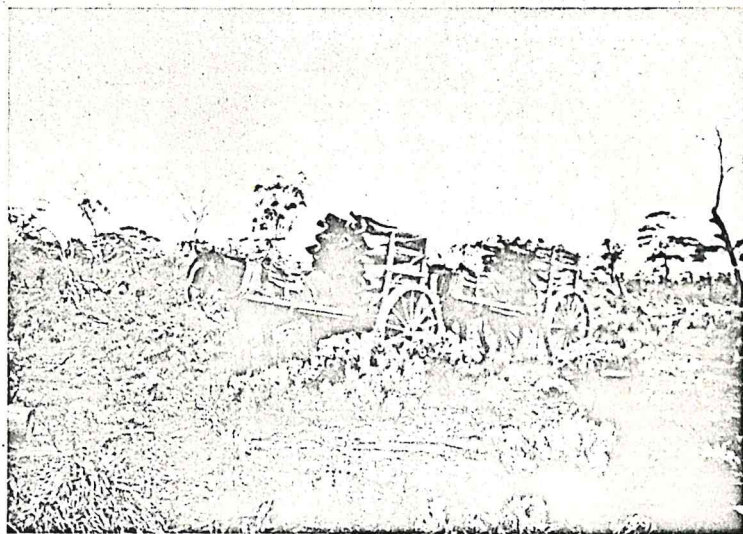
THROUGH Lakeside we passed with hardly a soul stirring at that hour. Houses newly transplanted from Kurrawang and others still on wheels awaiting removal on jinkers showed the state of confusion that the change of head-quarters had caused. Six miles farther on we passed two new dams of 6,000,000-gallons capacity being excavated with camel-teams and tractors. The operation of the wood-line calls for heavy water consumption. The change-over has meant the abandonment of several first-class catchments and the creation of others. The way was through country that had been previously cut out, leaving a few unprofitable trees standing and a regrowth that in half a century may make it possible to go over this country again. A little after nine we passed Hogan's Patch and could see the waters of Lake Lefroy stretching away to the right. Soon we were at the 33-Mile, where there are six large tanks containing 44,000 gallons of water-supply for engines en route. Near by is an extensive water-diversion scheme, in which 15 miles of drains are used and 60,000,000 gallons of water stored.

The wood-line train not only conveys timber to the mines, but always carries its quota of water-trucks for the supply of camps and horse-lines along both the main railway and the spurs. There is no reticulation, and a 500-gallon tank is

allowed to every two camps. These tanks are replenished as required. Stores, too, are carried by the train, and in the guard's van are meat-hooks for sides of bacon and mutton and cupboards for the bread, which is baked each day and distributed from Kurrawang.

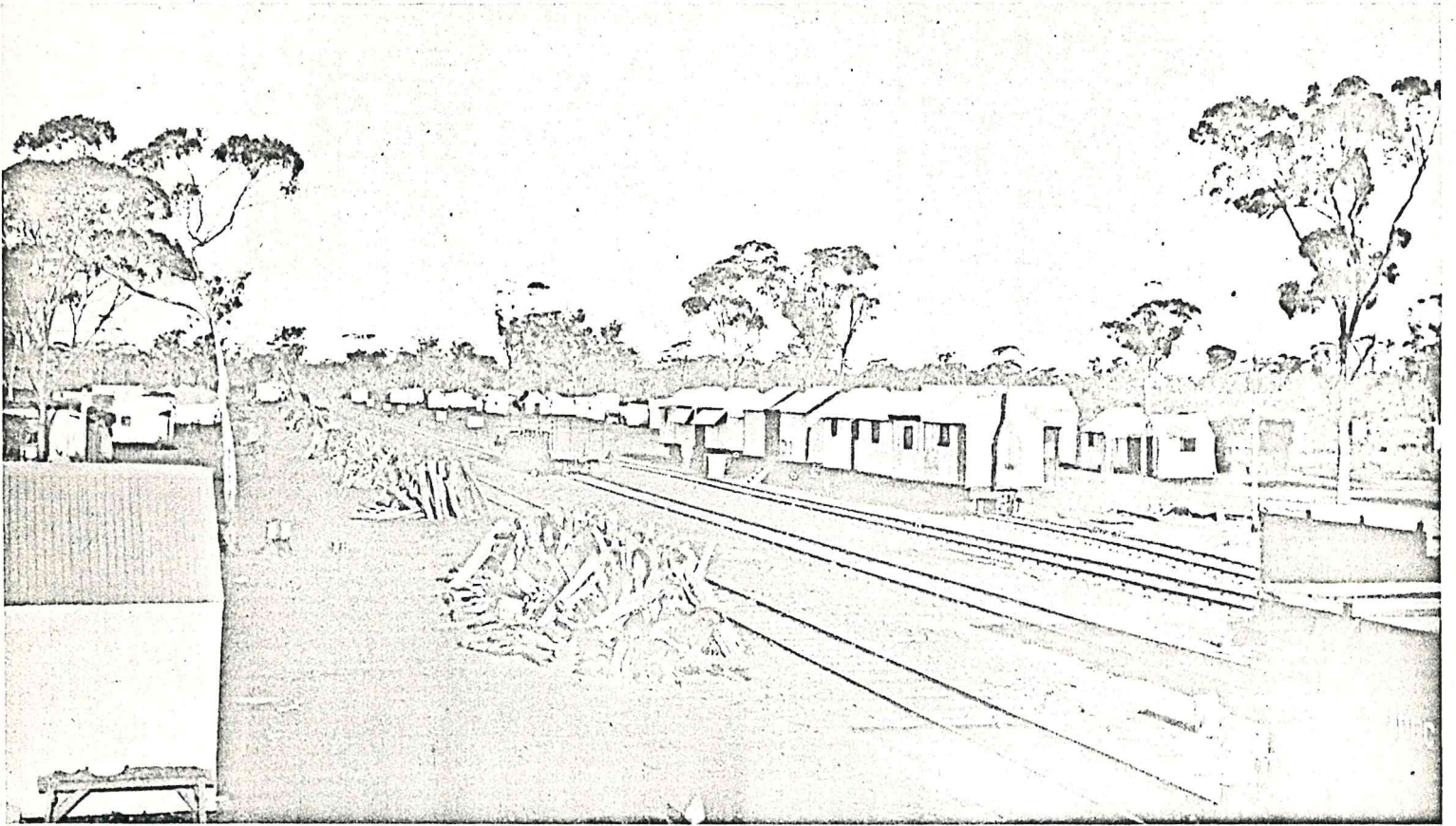
Here and there along the latter part of the track, engine-wood was stacked and stops were made to replenish the fuel-supply, so that, with all these delays, we did not reach the head of the line until a little after twelve. There is probably no settlement anywhere in Australia so remarkable as this camp-site at the head of the Kurrawang wood-line. Housing over 300 men, some with their wives and children, it consists of a series of movable camps made of stout wooden frames covered with canvas. It is remarkable because it never remains in the one place more than nine months. As the timber is cut, the main camp moves on. The loading, removing, and unloading are completed in twenty-four hours, so that while one day sees the camp in one place, the next sees it completely established and in smooth running order in another. This, perhaps, explains why the W.A. Goldfields Firewood Company had no hesitation in agreeing to the transfer of their head-quarters from Kurrawang to Lakeside. They are used to this sort of thing. It is part of the regular routine of their business. The buildings are jacked up, and wooden supports are placed under them until they are high enough for jinkers to be pushed under. They are then drawn to the railway line, straddled across a "float," and the long procession of sixty or so camps moves off to its new location. It is a great sight on "shifting-day." Curtains wave familiarly in transit, and even domestic fowls have been observed perched on the window-sill of their itinerant homes.

This new lease is on Crown lands administered by the Forestry Department, and a royalty is paid to the Government on all timber taken. The cutters, most of whom are Slavs, have to obtain a licence, and their work is regularly inspected. If



CARTING WOOD TO THE RAILWAY.

their work is not done in accordance with the regulations laid down by the Forestry Department, their licence is endorsed. Two endorsements mean dismissal. Each cutter operates a block a mile long by a chain wide, abutting on the main railway or spur line. Sometimes the cutters work in pairs, and the products of their labours are carted in stocky little drays to the railway line.



THE "HEAD OF THE LINE," KURRAWANG WOOD-LINE.

There was a full train waiting to leave the main camp when we arrived. After an hour for lunch, it would start off on the long, laborious journey to Kalgoorlie with over 300 tons of wood to be drawn up and down a variety of grades. At the same time the empty rake set off for the bush camps to load up and return, so that it would be ready to leave with a full quota of timber at six o'clock that evening. With the departure of this train a hush descended upon the main camp. Most of the men were in the bush. The youngsters were at school, where there is an enrolment of 43, many of them second-generation Slavs and Italians. I took this opportunity of exploring the settlement, meeting and yarning with the bush foreman, the medical officer, and others whose administrative work made for the smooth running of the company's activities. An empty tobacco-pouch sent me in search of the store, which I found perched permanently on wheels so that shifting-day, when it came, would present no problems. Next to it was the butcher's shop, also on wheels, and enclosed with fly-wire. A boarding-house provides ample and well-cooked meals, and with the remaining fifty or sixty houses that's all there is to the main camp. Night falls in a strangely tranquil manner. Lights appear in the windows. A great luminous moon comes up and floods the entire camp with its light. Strolling about, one hears the near-by blare of a radio, for civilization has penetrated the solitude of this remote place. Now and then from the shadows comes the drone of male voices. Men are sitting there, somewhere. You can't see them, but you can hear them, probably exchanging yarns or perhaps discussing cricket or racing prospects.

At six next morning the camp is astir, for an hour later a

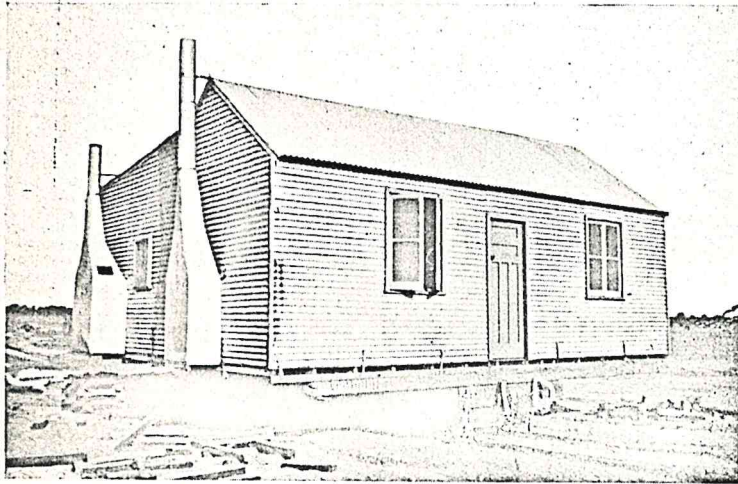
rake of empty trucks is backed out, carrying its freight of workers to their cutting-operations in the bush. Heads appear, thrust out of the trucks all along the train. We travel, in reverse, perhaps five-miles along the first spur through an avenue of piled-up firewood awaiting loading. At the end of the spur the train stops, detaches a few trucks, moves back, detaches a few more, until all the trucks are strung out in twos and threes near the stacks which are to be loaded. Each of these is distinguished from the others by having a leafy branch stuck in one of the logs. Cutters and loaders scramble over the sides of the trucks, and work is in full swing in a few minutes.

THE bush resounds with the sharp "clip-clop" of axes. Now and then you can hear the swish and thud of a falling tree. Cross-cut saws reduce the timber to five-foot lengths, axes trim off twigs and small branches, and then the carters arrive to convey the product to the railway-line. The horses seem to know exactly what is required of them and draw their piled-up drays unerringly along sinuous bush-tracks to the desired spot. Unloading is a work of art. The tip-drays are backed into position adjacent to an existing stack of timber, the pins removed, and then tipped so that the timber stands on its end like a stook of wheat. There is no further stacking to be done. Everything is ready for the truck-loaders, the logs upright so that they can be the more easily handled. They are sturdy fellows, these loaders. A solid log, five feet long and a foot thick, is picked up and carried to the truck with little apparent effort. In the truck, a second loader arranges them compactly so that they will ride well.

With the exception of some of the carters who are day labourers, all these bush-workers are paid at piece-work rates.

Wandering along the line, watching the loading operations, I was at some difficulty to understand how one man's work could be recognized from another's. I was told there was the cutter's name on each pile, but it was not for some time that I could discover the identification sticks bearing the pencilled names of the cutters and, sometimes, of the carters also. Thus one would be inscribed: "Fred Bros.—Radalj, 9d."; and another: "Innocenti—Bongi (Finish)."

Larger trees provide timber too valuable to be used as firewood. This is cut into ten or twelve feet lengths and goes



A HOUSE BEING REMOVED FROM KURRAWANG TO THE NEW HEADQUARTERS AT LAKESIDE.

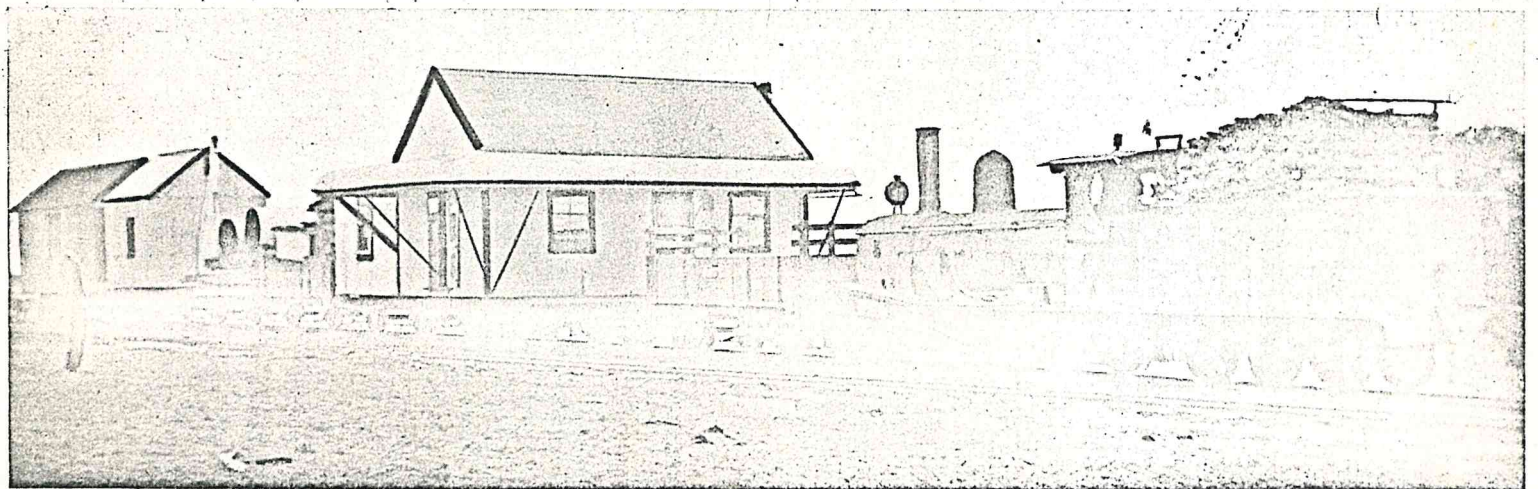
not to the mines or the power-house, but to the saw-mill at Kurrawang, where it is cut into baulks and later used for underground timbering in the mines, or as sawn timber for building purposes.

At last the loading is finished. In the distance is heard the engine's whistle, and presently begins the slow process of backing the trucks together, coupling them until the entire train is made up. The engine steams slowly back to the main camp and an hour later will begin its leisurely journey to Kalgoorlie.

There are three of these spur-lines, along which cutting and loading operations take place every day. As the country is cut out, the spur-line is taken up and shifted with the same slick efficiency with which the main camp is periodically

uprooted. Four or five weeks is probably the longest time that the spur-line will remain down in any one section, so that the men whose camps lie along these are subject to far more frequent upheavals than are those at the main camp. So life goes on, year in, year out, on the Kurrawang Wood-line. Some five hundred men, including those at the bush camps, sixty-four women, and one hundred and five children lead a kind of gypsy existence among the salmon-gum, blackbutt, gimlet, and ti-tree forests that lie east and south-east of Kalgoorlie. It seems strange to think of Kalgoorlie as a "desert" city, with all this valuable timber within easy reach. When one considers that the average rainfall in these parts is about five to seven inches, it is surprising that the countyside should be covered with forests that in every respect resemble those of the more fortunate wheat-belt. On the return trip from the head of the line to Lakeside, there was ample time, as the train dragged its long length slowly along, to observe that the soil looked rich and that the proportion of good quality country to sand-plain was much higher than it would have been over a similar distance in most parts of the wheat-belt.

IN the guard's van during this tedious journey of over seven hours, with half a dozen meat-hooks jangling continuously from a horizontal rod overhead, there was time, too, to muse over the tremendous organization of the W.A. Goldfields Firewood Supply Company. Besides its 140 miles of railway-line, 220 wood-trucks, 12 log-floats, 22 water-tanks, and its large staffing problems, it is self-sufficient in its meat-supply and runs 1,100 head of cattle and 6,000 sheep on its leases. Maintenance of its lines and rolling-stock is equalled only by the vigilance which attends the guarding and preservation of its water-supplies. It has a long record of useful service to the gold-mining industry, and, although in recent years there has been a diminution of the firewood requirements of mines that have installed oil-burning furnaces, there is a steady demand both from the mines and from the Kalgoorlie power-house for 700 tons of firewood per day. At the head of the line I asked the surveyor how long it would take to cut out the present lease. He looked at me with a smile. "Not in my time, nor in yours," he said. So it will go on as long as the mines continue to function at Kalgoorlie, and how long that will be no one, in the light of recent developments, would be so unwise as to guess.



MOVING-DAY ON THE KURRAWANG WOOD-LINE.