

This article was written in 2004, and published on the Victoria's Forestry Heritage website in
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First Impressions

I was driven from Mirboo North on transfer to Heyfield in a utility, with only the personal gear I needed, and could fit into a single bedroom. Furniture, books and so on had to be left behind for the time being. It was a hot day, hazy with drift smoke from distant burning off. After we left Rosedale, the scene over the empty dry pasture land, with scattered bleached dead eucalypts reflecting the mid-day sunshine, was eerie. The transition from the southern uplands to the north Gippsland plains heralded the changes I would find in duties and opportunities, the social scene, and living conditions.

I had stayed a night in Heyfield in the summer of 1951-52, on my way to vacation work in the district. That was at the Commercial Hotel, right by some cattle yards, occupied overnight by restless stock. It was a warm night and the scent of the cattle yard blended with the distinctive mercaptan smell drifting from the chemical pulp mill at Maryvale.

The one main street of the town and the adjoining one nearer the railway station had the run of shops one might expect when Maffra, Sale and Traralgon were reasonably close for more specialised shopping.

North of the railway line, in the vicinity of sawmills, were the new houses forming Little Europe. Here the workforce for the mills and forest work had established a community of the mixed backgrounds of Australia's post-war arrivals. Most of the houses were small and at least partially built by their owners. Not all the local timber used in construction went out the front gates of mills. On occasions I saw where the security fence near sawn timber stacks had been cut, and nocturnal footfalls had made a path from gap towards the nearest street of houses.

European food preferences meant that fresh we breads (from a bakery at Warragul) and Edam and other imported cheeses were readily available, in contrast to other small places in East Gippsland.

Thrift and hard work seemed to be the general motto of the residents of Little Europe. A scene that has always stuck in my mind is the view past the front of the Railway Hotel one still, hot Saturday afternoon as I walked from the Forest Office around the block to the State Rivers camp. The three or four Old Australians enjoying their beers under the shady verandah were amused to watch an elderly man and wife slowly taking home dry grass bundled tightly in hessian and balanced on the handlebars and seat of a bicycle they were pushing. They had permission to scythe grass on the State Rivers land and they had a cow on their small holding not far over the railway line. A couple of quiet remarks by the drinkers were scarcely needed to establish the gulf between old and new attitudes to the opportunities of the day. The couple had made several trips home with hay by sunset.

On my first Saturday morning in Heyfield a man sitting in a car at the kerb outside the Post Office called to me to come over to the open passenger's window. He was dressed in Police shirt and trousers and demanded my name, occupation and address, and where I had come from. He was the solitary policeman in Heyfield, and had seen it grow quickly from a sleepy cattle town to a bustling sawmilling centre. People said he was the last to bed and the first up in the mornings. I got to know him quite well. When eventually he retired, I heard he was replaced by a sergeant and two constables.

Accommodation

For accommodation, I fell on my feet, for I became a member of the staff mess at the extensive State Rivers and Water Supply Commission's establishment on the outskirts of Heyfield. The District Forester

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was able to arrange this for me because I was a Victorian public servant, and he had kindly done this in good time before my arrival.

The other members of the mess were the single surveyors and engineers working on the final stages of the Dennison/Nambrok irrigation scheme. Some of the hutments and workshops were unoccupied, as were a few of the houses which had been family quarters.

The mess was well inside the area occupied by the SRWSC, and was about ten minute walk from the Forest Office. In the centre of the long building was a large common-room, full width across the building, and a central passageway running to both ends had bedrooms each side, and a bathroom with showers and wash basins. There were shallow metal footbaths placed on the floor outside each shower recess containing a solution of potassium permanganate, for compulsory use to prevent the spread of athlete's foot. The footbaths were maintained by an orderly. Remember, this was an establishment run by engineers with responsibility and efficiency in mind: the efficiency of the surveyors was important. In all the time I was there I do not think anyone had tinea. There were several thunderboxes in a large outbuilding not far from the mess hut, maybe about eight of them, fully serviced and more numerous than the few of us required. A few metres further on was the dining room hut, large enough to accommodate about 20 diners. There was no more than half that number of us, and some weeks only six or eight, because staffing was being wound down. All the other residents of the camp were SRWSC men, until another Forests Commission chap was posted to Heyfield. Two were quiet and withdrawn but the rest were cheery company. Elsewhere in the camp there were staff houses for engineers and administrative and workshop staff. Our cook, Mrs Russell was married to a machine operator and had been a cook in the Army. To my surprise and delight she called in to the School of Forestry one afternoon in the 1970s to say hello while passing through Creswick.

I was asked to pay the nominal amount of only 1/- a day to stay at the camp, plus my share of the cost of foodstuffs for the mess. An orderly kindled the fire in the common-room just before he went home on a winter's afternoon, and he kept up a good supply of firewood, box and red gum. The place was kept clean and shiny, and there was ample hot water.

There were garages for staff cars, a couple spare. Hopefully there would be one for my car, when I had managed to buy one.

Characters

The cheery members used to drink beer on a Friday night until late, and their singing was my lullaby. One of the really quiet chaps, an ex-soldier with a metal plate in his head provided by an Army surgeon, had bought a Morris Minor. When the car was due at the garage for its first service at 300 miles from new, he offered me a weekend ride to Melbourne. Bill Orders had worked out how many miles it was to the agency in Melbourne, and wanted to drive in just as the 300 miles showed. He had prepared for this during the previous week or so, even going to the trouble of walking into town in pouring rain, to save mileage.

He offered me a weekend ride to town a couple of times, and would leave Heyfield at, let's say, six on the Saturday morning, warning me that if I was not ready he would drive off even if he saw me in the mirror waving to him. I remember on the first occasion sitting in the common room at 5.45 am all ready to leave, while the revellers were finishing their final songs. What's more, Bill was also sitting there, occasionally looking at his watch, ready to walk out. He was obsessed with punctuality and accuracy generally, and his workmates told me he once threw his wristwatch away and bought another. We sat there in silence while the minutes passed, and then at 5.59 am we walked out to the waiting car.

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Bill's peculiar attention to the car was manifested in another way. It stood in an unlined but fully enclosed galvanised-iron garage at the camp. When a heavy frost was in the air, he would drape two grey blankets over it.

Sometimes a few cats would make a noise at night near our hut, which annoyed Bill no end. He made powerful shanghais designed to catapult ball bearings at a target. The balls came from the SRWCS maintenance workshops. Bill was a great shot and cats lasted a very short time if there was moonlight. For some reason he carried a shanghai out on the job, perhaps for dogs, doing level surveys in the farmlands. According to one of the other members of his survey crew, a large pig came grunting around them one day and Bill scored a hit with the first ball bearing and felled the animal. It did not move again, at least until they were out of sight, and they assumed that Bill had added a pig to his tally.

Bill took me golfing on the Heyfield course two or three times, not that I was much good at the game. His renowned approach to the tee was well known. He would tee the ball and walk away for a few paces, look up to the sky, and walk up to his ball and drive without any hesitation or careful placing of his feet. He repeated this style for fairway strokes. Bill carried a flask of rum in the hip pocket and a swig here and there was also part of his golfing style. He was a mild mannered chap, with a trace of a stammer. I got the impression he was respected for his competence on the job.

The new forestry man was also Bill, W. M. Simmons, ex-Army and prisoner of war taken by the Japanese. He did clerical and general duties based on the Heyfield office. His health was not good, but he made a habit of being cheerful, with a wry twist of humour. He often slept poorly, saying the only night he got a good sleep was the one he troubled the occupants of adjoining bedrooms with his cries. An incident at the mealtime in the State Rivers mess one evening revealed as much as any other the scars of his POW experiences. Three of us were casually lined up at the servery for our meal, Bill being first. He took his plate, looked at it, silently handed it back to Mrs Russell, turned on his heel and walked out. He did not appear from his room until the next day. Mrs Russell was nonplussed, and we were puzzled, accustomed as we were to some fairly sudden changes of mood. In his own good time, Bill told us that the sight of boiled rice on the plate was more than he could bear, and explained that he had vowed when he returned to Australia never to eat rice again. His memories associated with rice included two prisoners fighting over a few grains salvaged from the bottom of a slush bin.

Move into a House

In April 1954 I was married, in anticipation of which I rented a small house in the same street as the Forest Office some six weeks beforehand, in order to get it ready to live in. It was a fibro-cement place, not finished off properly, and had become vacant when the log truck driver who rented it did a moonlight flit from the town. The truckie owed money to several businesses in Heyfield. As soon as I heard about it I went to the owner, Harry Tryhorn, who ran a hardware shop and timber yard, and he let me have the place for 30/- a week.

There was no lease, just a spoken arrangement. I painted inside and put coverstrips over the junctions of the sheets outside as the main jobs, apart from digging open gutters to take away rainwater from the roof downpipes. There was no other house to let in the town, and I did not qualify for married quarters at the State Rivers establishment.

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My bride was pleased with the decorating, but wary of the one-fire stove and oven. We had electric hot water. Heyfield was not sewered and the dunny was right at the far corner of the yard. At least our cottage was in a town, and very near the Forest Office.

Duties

The District Forester's other assistant had finished at the School of Forestry in 1947, one year ahead of me, and he was living in the camp at Connors Plain. This was a road construction and maintenance camp. Logs for nine sawmills passed by the camp and were checked at Licola, where the road ran down on to the flat country. I did not have much to do with activities centred on Connors Plain. Often I did the fortnightly pay run, after collecting the cash from the bank and making up the envelopes. It was always a relief when the money left on the bench for the last envelope matched the amount written on it. The envelopes were not sealed until that happy conclusion, in case there had to be a recount.

The pay run was predictable and widely known. The total in the leather bag was enough to ask for a pistol, but the risk of hold-up was thought to be low and pistols are dangerous things. I used to throw an old hessian sack over the leather bag. The instruction was, 'Stop for no one'. Heading north with the pay, it was hard to drive on past a man trudging by the roadside south of Licola one Thursday afternoon without acknowledging him or offering a lift. No doubt a stranded farmer and a member of a fire brigade as well - or, he could have been a decoy. Another time the Land Rover was in third gear purring up the climb above Licola when around a curve stood a ruffian in the centre of the road waving me down. I slowed to a crawl then accelerated to pass him. He shouted and leapt at the Land Rover, forcing me to stop. I felt for the jack handle beside the seat as he walked to the window. Blasting in progress; have to wait, mate. A Country Roads Board gang was widening a section of the road beneath a high batter. In those times there was no warning notice, the man wore no bright waistcoat and hard hats were not in general use, so he was a nondescript figure.

Getting back to my introduction to Heyfield, the District Forester had defined an initial set of duties for me, all based on Heyfield and concentrating on the flat country, the foothills and the forests up through Seaton to Mt Useful. My tasks included sawmill inspections to enforce the fire protection regulations. My duties were not in a written statement, but became well understood by both of us.

They involved supervision of logging near Mt Useful, which dovetailed in the summer with looking after the fire lookout man on Mt Useful. He was an engineering student on university vacation, and on the weekly rations run the idea was to stay and talk to him for even an hour or so. He might talk face to face with nobody else for days on end. There was no telephone, and use of the TRP radio for chit chat was not allowed. The lookout point was the survey cairn on the mount, where he used an old military alidade very effectively. I think he took the job on Mt Useful for three summers, and was a reliable lookout. He could read vertical angles from the ex-Army instrument provided by the Commission, and it amused him to estimate the position of a fire on the plains, using bearing and distance. On one occasion he radioed the bearing of a smoke, and added that he reckoned the fire to be by the railway line so many chains west of a certain crossing not far from Maffra. That estimate was out by less than a hundred metres. He liked to lie on his bed, hitched up with fencing wire to the level of the high window sill of the hut, and watch the stars, free from man-made light.

There was no forest foreman stationed at Heyfield, so I supervised the few pole contractors and miscellaneous timber cutters working on the flat country, learning the specifications of the products as well as the tricks of contractors. The main pole contractor was Barney McDiarnid, who specialised in small

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orders for naturally durable telephone poles for regional use by the Postmaster General's department. It was sometimes difficult to find ironbark trees with a clear trunk long enough to yield the longest poles in an order, and he was the only pole contractor I ever struck whose tools included a mattock and shovel. Barney could estimate to within a couple of inches how deep he had to dig around the tree to come up with the right length. His digging had to accommodate the engine of his chainsaw. A few deft trimming strokes with an axe cleaned up the butt of the pole so that the PMG timber inspector would accept it.

The most competent cutter of fencing timbers was Hans de Vries, who could squeeze extra sawn posts to meet specifications from sections of box and ironbark. He and his wife lived near the shore of Lake Glenmaggie, and were members of the drama and literary group in Heyfield.

Before Spring had arrived the golden wattle in the ironbark–white stringybark woodland suddenly came into spectacular blossom. I collected a brilliant armful one sunny afternoon, on an impulse, to present to the DFO's wife upon my return to base. Their house was next door to the office, and they had been hospitable to me. I knocked at the back door, she opened it and slammed the door in my face. I went into the rear door of the office and presented the blossom to the office girl, and wondered what I had done to deserve the rebuff. A telephone call for me. It was Mrs DFO apologising earnestly for the abrupt dismissal of a kind gesture - she was very sensitive to wattle pollen.

I was called on to keep the maps and plans up to date as information was gathered. This was a job that could be fitted in on the days when I had to be in the office for other reasons, or when the weather was bad.

We had a clerk, Frank Whitelaw, who travelled from Maffra. He was an affable chap, no longer young, and was a source of useful facts and opinions. I did not have many onerous clerical tasks to do, except once a month when the log accounts for the sawmills had to be tallied and sent to head office. Foolscap folios of entries of the length and girth of every log, yes, every log carted from the forest for each mill had to be compiled from the carter's loading dockets, together with the corresponding volume (in Hoppus units) and subtotals of the log volume carried forward until the final sheet. Not only that, but the net volume of each log had to be obtained by subtracting any allowance for heart rot or other major defect from the gross volume obtained from a table of volume for various girths and log lengths in a book (or from corresponding volumes arrayed on a rotating cylinder). This cylinder had been made in the first place for use in field offices of the Forestry Commission of NSW. The Victorian Commission would not provide us with a desk calculator and it was a tedious task adding up the entries on the foolscap forms. There were pages and pages of entries to deal with. To cope with the deadline for log accounting we used to borrow an electric adding machine from the butter factory at Heyfield overnight. It put out a paper strip showing the entries and total. This helped no end, but ate into the evening hours. The bureaucratic obstacle was mystifying – why not buy a machine for use during office hours, for one of the two largest offices in terms of sawlog revenue, the other being Mansfield? [When firefighting overtime for staff was introduced, for the 1954-55 summer from memory, the District Forester at Beaufort, who did not agree with overtime for professional officers, and who had been unable to apply successfully for a calculator for use in his office, accepted a cheque for firefighting overtime and promptly spent the money on a calculator. The District Forester at Ballarat rejected overtime for himself or his assistant by destroying the blank claim forms sent to him by Head Office, declaring 'There'll be no overtime in my district, lad!']

Enforcing the *Forest Industries Fire Protection Regulations* was an intermittent task, done against resistance, sometimes sullen, by some managers at the mills or in the forest. The prospect of interrogation by a coroner or an insurance inspector was a spur to diligence in policing the Act and regulations. At the sawmills the waste pits, in which edgings and hearts of logs burned away, were the main concern. In the

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mountain forests the maintenance of refuge dugouts was always a concern, together with the provision of fire equipment for logging crews, and efficient spark arrestors on engines. The Commission's view was that persuasion was better than force - fine, but it took time and some exercise of craft to get licensees to toe the line. On one occasion things did go wrong. A licensee had simply failed to comply with reasonable and repeated requests, and the District Forester decided to suspend the licence forthwith, which meant that operations in the forest and at the sawmill had to stop. This was in the morning. By mid-afternoon the licensee had driven to Melbourne for urgent interview, put his case and the word came by telephone for the suspension to be lifted. Talk about pulling the rug from under a man's feet.

The sawmillers at Heyfield had formed an industry group and appointed a manager to represent them to the Forests Commission, Victorian Railways, local government, the Country Roads Board and other agencies and organisations. He was A. E. (Bert) Head, a product of the Victorian School of Forestry in 1933. He could usually be found in the side bar of the Commercial Hotel at the end of the day, where he extended his office hours in conversation with sawmill men, truck owners, and others. The District Forester had no fondness for an hour at the pub, but taught me it was politic to turn up once in a while for a yarn. We went there together twice or three times a fortnight, and I learned how fruitful casual listening and chat could be. Gossip, hints, warnings, brickbats and approving nods formed a useful harvest. These relaxed encounters allowed the forester to launch his own arrows when it suited him. Bert Head himself was worth careful study by a young forester interested in the arts of persuasion and debate.

The loads of logs from the mountain forests were inspected by two men at the checking station by the roadside at Licola. Check measurements of the log girth (underbark half way along the log) and length were made of a small sample of logs, and allowances for internal defect based on external indicators were entered against the log dimensions. If a late truck passed through in the dark, the docket was endorsed 'CID', checked in dark, which relieved the checking officer of responsibility for the accuracy of any allowance for defect. The allowances made could be either a length of log allowance or a square of heartwood for part or all of the log length, to allow for rot extending from the butt of a tree.

The amount of the allowance made for defect was important to the sawlog licensees, because the amount of royalty paid to the Commission was calculated on the net volume after subtraction of a volume for defect was subtracted from the gross volume of the log. The whole business of log measurement and allowances was a crazy mixture of units, because the unit of gross volume was HLV, that is, Hoppus Log Volume in super feet, worked out according to a rule devised in the early eighteenth century by an English surveyor for boilers and other cylindrical cargo consigned by ship, and heart-out allowances for rot in a log were expressed in true volume units. Edward Hoppus's rule assumed that one-quarter of the girth of a cylinder equalled the side of the square that could be inscribed within the circle, and was called the quarter-girth rule in English and colonial forestry when applied to forest logs. One could see some sense in using it for hardwood logs squared up with axes and adzes in the eighteenth century or for timber from tropical forests to be hauled to sawmills: millers did not want the sapwood which squaring got rid of and the squared up log gave them a flying start for sawing rectangular timbers.

A defect allowance deducted from the length of a log was calculated in HLV, the same unit as the gross volume of the log, but a heart-out allowance, being a square expressed in square inches extending for a length expressed in feet, was a unit called the super foot, of 144 square inches.

Of course, the side of the inscribed square does not equal a quarter of the circumference of the circle, so the Hoppus unit is not the same as the true volume calculated from length of log and its average cross sectional area. The fact that the ratio of Hoppus to true volume is the same for all diameters of logs saved

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the system from the pitfalls of some American log rules, but the craziness meant that I could never take the system seriously. What we had to take seriously was the demands by millers for fresh allowances to be made for defects in logs delivered to their yards in Heyfield, when the log was rolled over in the yard and evidence of defect was easier to see than when the log was one of several on a truck, or when the breaking down saw had revealed much more rot in the log than could be judged from its outside appearance.

Of course, a miller did not telephone the office when the checking officers had over-allowed for defect, for sometimes the internal condition of a log belied the hints of its external bumps and scars, and the log yielded a high proportion of prime sawn timber.

It was irksome on an office day to have to respond to a phone call to go to a mill straight away to look at a log for which a miller or his foreman challenged the allowance written on the log docket. A couple of firms could be depended on for frequent demands made in an aggressive manner. Allowances for defect were invariably increased, grudgingly enough, just to quench the complaint.

It was a shame that the Commission did not come out and insist that its sawlog royalty equation system was based on the average proportion of merchantable sawn timber milled from the net volume of logs recorded by its measuring officers, the average recovery for the whole year, and by no means would allowances on individual logs be altered. The Commission invested quite a lot of money in sawmill study crews which tallied sawn timber of the various grades obtained from different categories of logs, to establish typical recovery estimates for different classes of logs. The inspection of logs at checking stations, or in forest dumps, did build in a consistent procedure for allowances for obvious serious defects, and was not without cost. The cost to the taxpayer of an employee of the department interrupting his work and hastening to a sawmill at the call of the licensee or his representative was often considerable.

The demands to come and inspect a broken-down log in the mill were small irritations that had to be endured, like insect bites in the forest.

The working relationship between the Commission's staff and the sawmillers and their crews and contractors was usually cordial, with a good measure of mutual respect. Both sides recognised the imperatives of the other, and settled down to a productive if wary working truce.

Victoria Police

As I have said, meeting the town's policeman formed one of my first impressions of Heyfield. Effective liaison with him was very important in managing day to day forest affairs. He provided a prime example of how a solitary resident member of the Force could police a town and immediate district. Sometime after I left Heyfield I was told that when Jim Draper was replaced it was with a sergeant and two constables. That he managed to keep on top of his job as the town burgeoned from a sleepy cattle and farmers' town to a major hardwood sawmilling centre points to his resourcefulness and energy. I was told he ran cattle himself as a profitable sideline, and if he did that could have explained his lengthy posting to Heyfield.

Good relations with the policeman meant quick access to information about individuals and events which held interest to forest officers, and in return we were expected to yield news and views when he sought them. Allies were so important when the ratio of square miles of State forest to numbers of forest staff was very high.

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He enlisted me to be a volunteer ambulance driver. The local doctor's induction for the task seemed rough and ready, and Jim did not regard him as much of a doctor, but there we were, ready for the call. Fortunately it never came.

Social Scene

There was a much greater variety of people in and near Heyfield than at any district posting I had had so far. There were engineers and other staff of the State Rivers and Water Supply Commission, farmers belonging to the old families, and farmers recently settled on dairy farms in the Dennison-Nambrok irrigation area, sawmillers and their staff; a doctor who had set up practice in Heyfield, clergy, school teachers, and the shopkeepers and others in business.

Some of the new farmers had wives with artistic and professional backgrounds, and I was soon a member of the dramatic society, learning about play-reading, stage props and so on.

I had the usual trouble with competitive tennis, even when the DFO and I offered to alternate weekends in a team, to allow us to play and to take our turn on fire standby. This arrangement collapsed early in the piece, because a going forest fire would require both of us to go on duty, and the tennis team became a man short for the next player who had not been selected for the match that Saturday would likely as not have gone fishing or otherwise disappeared.

Duty called at any time: one Sunday I was walking from the SRWSC camp to an early church service when the DFO drove up to summon me to immediate fire duty.

There were small and merry parties from time to time. The doctor, a large man, went to a fancy dress party as Peter Pan, and deserved a prize for his outfit. He was called away to minister to a woman in labour, who was startled to see Peter Pan by her bedside. Mrs de Vries and her timber-cutter husband lived by the Glenmaggie Reservoir were hospitable, as were Bert and Joan Head.

I bought a car while I was at Heyfield, not many months before our wedding-day, and this allowed me to make weekend visits to Melbourne outside the fire danger season. The car was a black Y-type MG saloon purchased from an elderly patient whom my future wife had nursed after an operation. I do not remember driving far afield otherwise, say, to Sale or Traralgon.

We were in Heyfield for far too short a time for my wife to get to know folk well. Upon becoming married, my status with former hosts and associates changed and none of us had become used to that by the time we had to go.

Goodbye Gippsland

Out of the blue once again came orders to transfer, this time to the Ballarat Forest District. The DFO received a phone call from head office telling him to pass on the news, and assured me he had no prior knowledge of it. He reassured me that he was completely satisfied with my work and appreciated the wholehearted way I had taken on a wide range of duties.

So, it was time to pack up yet another time and move on to work in forests close to Victoria's largest inland city. Protecting and managing activities in regrowth forests which had followed the onslaught of the gold miners and settlers would be so different. I had no inkling of what tasks were in store for me as assistant to

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an old DFO who had not had one before, and whose experience had been in the Bendigo, Smythesdale districts and only recently at Ballarat.