

This article was written in 2004 and published on the Victoria's Forestry Heritage website in  
September 2018

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## **My Arrival**

My posting to Mirboo North as assistant forester, at the end of 1952, was a curious episode in my short field career, which I shall relate as it comes to mind. I had just finished my degree course and had hoped to spend Christmas with my parents in Balwyn, but orders came to report to Mirboo North on the 23rd of December.

I arrived by train from Melbourne late in the morning and took my gear over the road to the Commercial Hotel in the main street. There I lodged for much of my time at Mirboo North.

I was on the job straight after lunch. No sooner had I made my way to the Forest Office to meet the District Forester when he took me out to work with the forest gang, of about five men, burning firebreak strips inside the fence of the golf club. This was a quick way to get to know members of the gang, if not quite the induction I expected. I was accustomed to the use of district resources to help sporting clubs and a town generally, so that aspect did not surprise me.

The afternoon's toil produced a financial advantage as it turned out, for when I returned to the hotel in smoky clothes to meet the housekeeper she set my full weekly board at five pounds. One evening late in January a teller arrived to relieve for three weeks at the bank along the street. He drove a Morris Oxford sedan, was almost a tailor's dummy in my eyes, and had a gold cigarette case. The housekeeper would know he was on a living allowance from the bank, and I overheard his tariff, seven pounds ten shillings.

I did not know the District Forester, Alan Galbraith, and had never heard stories about him, as one often had about colourful personalities in the service. I had been told that he was a cousin of a former Chairman of the Forests Commission, A. V. Galbraith, and had been appointed a Forest Supervisor by examination. He had a small office, in the front part of the garage/store at the end of the driveway down the side of his quarters. He sat behind his desk and fired a question, 'Are you one of them?' Taking an inspired guess that he meant Roman Catholics, I answered 'No', and he relaxed a little. He went on to lay down two rules I must obey - never touch the sharpened pencils standing in the tumbler on his desk, never drive the district utility. He then announced I was quartermaster for the Scout troop, which kept its stuff in the adjacent store-room.

Here I was to assist a man who had not had an assistant before, and was obviously wary of what I would be like. It did not take long to sense that he was waiting for me to be critical of his management of the district. Behind his gruff defensiveness he was a kind man. He tended a big vegetable and flower garden, and the Prince of Wales feathers in a bed near the office were brilliant that season. Mrs Galbraith was a quiet, kind woman.

## **Forest Districts and Plantations**

The Commission's field and head office administration distinguished between forest districts embracing the hardwood forests and the plantations branch responsible for softwood and hardwood plantations. In these 'heartbreak hills' the Commission had launched the South Gippsland Reafforestation Scheme some years earlier, and was planting up abandoned and purchased farmland, mainly with radiata pine. The officer in charge, Derrick Rolland, had an office and depot next door to the Forest Office. He and I had been students at Creswick for the same three years. The two establishments had adjacent frontages to the main road. The dividing fence which ran down to the back street was a border not to be crossed without good reason. There was a separate letter box at each street fence. Alan Galbraith proclaimed, 'We are the Forests Commission; they are Plantations.'

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Plantations had a proper office of several rooms, an office assistant, and a petrol bowser. We pumped petrol from a 44-gallon drum, but had the 100 watt radio transmitter to VL3AA Melbourne. Derrick had personal permission to go into the Forest Office at weekends to use the radio to get the weather forecasts. In those days staff received no payment for overtime for fire standby or for firefighting. We were paid by the year and worked by the year.

## **Fire Tower Duty**

I was pleased when a young schoolteacher enrolled me in the tennis club as soon as I arrived, to play in a team on Saturdays. He simply could not understand when I found out that I was required to man a fire tower at weekends and could not join the team. I never played a match with the club.

I accepted Alan Galbraith's instruction to man the tower without argument. Was there a choice? Not in those days; that was the way it was. I did say to Alan I thought it was tough on the weekday tower man not to score weekend overtime, but that was coldly received. The boss drove me out to Dickies Hill fire tower in the mornings and picked me up at the end of the day, until he started to allow me to take the Ford utility on the understanding he could phone me in the tower for it at any time. That never happened.

The ridges of South Gippsland spread out around me. Unaided by any suitable official map, I could but guess the identity of a few features. Alan did not climb the tower with me, and he did not think it was worthwhile to let me spend a day with the tower man to learn the outlook and pick up what information I could from him. The boss did warn me that the Dumbalk Butter Factory fired up its boiler with coal about three in the afternoon, sending up a black smoke. That was the only industrial smoke I recall. Sometime later I relished the story about a tower man in a coastal district who reported a moving smoke to the south – a ship well out to sea.

A sighting on smoke was taken with a hand-held liquid prismatic compass, this being before the Commission installed 360-degree true North calibrations around the walls of lookout cabins, and a central alidade wire to sight past. Hold on, what about the iron roof of the cabin? The test bearings I took on one distant object while standing in the corners of the cabin were wildly different, but I failed to convince the boss that we should mend our ways.

Nor would he concede that, even if we fluked a correct magnetic bearing on a pillar of smoke, the intersection of our line with the line from the lookout at Jeeralang, or another tower in Gippsland using a pivoting alidade set for true North, could not be the location of the fire on the map.

Farmers in the district were still cutting grass hay well into January that season, and fuel on the floor of the forests was not too dry, so the chances of a raging fire were remote. I cannot recall reporting any forest fire from the tower. One afternoon I spotted white smoke puffing up behind a grassy ridge, and then it was gone. A few minutes later there it was again, definite white puffs, and time to report smoke. I telephoned the compass bearing and estimated distance to Alan Galbraith at the quarters. An hour later he had the satisfaction of rubbing in that I had reported a farmer spreading superphosphate on a gusty afternoon.

## **A Lodger's Strategy**

At Nowa Nowa for part of 1949–50 I had lodged at its only hotel, and had made the mistake of not spending a penny in the bar. In several ways the licensee was objectionable, but I did not realise the cause at the time. At Mirboo North I allocated ten shillings a week to spend on 12 or so beers on, say, four occasions. Shortly before the bar would close at six o'clock, I would go into the bar parlour where the cook and

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waitress were enjoying a glass. They cheerfully accepted a beer from me, and we passed the time of day. Twice a week I would make a point of going into the parlour (called the cupboard in the evenings) where there might be a couple of commercial travellers and the barman. Beer for me and the barman, all to budget.

The cook and the waitress offered me the use of the hotel laundry on a Saturday morning, and even supplied a fresh bath-towel mid-week. At breakfast the waitress offered me eggs once they knew I did not care for sausages or chops in the morning. I had to eat early so that evidence of egg had gone by the announced breakfast time. The waitress was a tough, gaunt woman, who confided in me that she had to report regularly to the police station because of her parole. Her descriptions of membership of a razor gang in Fitzroy were colourful. I found her friendly and kind. One morning a commercial traveller came in early for his breakfast, and he could see through and around the Iceland poppies and gum tips in the cut glass vase at the centre of the table that I was polishing off the last of a poached egg. The waitress enquired of him, 'Sausages or chops?' He said he'd like eggs. 'Sausages or chops?' 'Eggs, like him, please.' Leaning over him a little, 'Sausages or chops!?!' 'Sausages, please,' as I slipped away.

I believe that the beer money and chat also ensured me very good cut lunches, which I took four or five times a week. Worlds apart from maggoty summer sandwiches at Nowa Nowa.

### **Unofficial Quarters**

Living at the hotel was comfortable enough but I preferred to get a place of my own. There was nothing to rent in town and a pedestrian could not live out of town. When Alan Galbraith said he understood I would be there three years I asked him the chances of setting up a hut on land the Commission had on the outskirts of Mirboo North, where town water and electricity were available. He agreed and put some of the gang to work joining two Stanley huts together to form two rooms, each eight by 12 feet. We erected an outhouse for a wash-house and dunny. There were the makings of comfortable digs in a quiet spot, with young eucalypts for shade

Soon the unofficial quarters were nearly ready, paid for partly with my own funds. I paid for connection of the water and electricity, and painted and furnished it myself. The district truck would bring my furniture and boxes from store in Balwyn. I had to work through the night before; painting the last of the internal walls so they could dry by the time the truck arrived.

I had an ice-chest, a circular-wick two-burner kerosene stove, electric toaster and jug, a pressure cooker, and not much else for cooking.

I invited the Shire secretary and his wife for afternoon tea, to repay their hospitality.

My place was only a few minutes' walk to the depot at the back of the office where the gang assembled in the morning about 7.30. If I did not go out with them, as soon as they left I would go to the office to work, perhaps going out to a forest later on.

### **District Activities**

The maps and parish plans held in the office were a pathetic few and not used much. The most useful map I had was my Broadbent tourist map of South Gippsland.

The supervision of timber-getting, inspections of forest land that was the subject of one form of application or another, and road maintenance come to mind as regular activities.

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Wilson's Promontory was effectively part of the district, although the official map of forest districts showed it was in Yarram Forest District. The Yarram District Forester was in bad odour following an extensive fire on the Promontory, and apparently the Inspector at Warragul had instructed Alan Galbraith to take it over. There was nothing on file in the office about it. One calm sunny day I went with him to Port Welshpool. He had chartered a boat in which we proceeded across Corner Inlet and the boatman landed us from a dinghy west of Mt Hunter. We had a good walk around among blackened banksias, taking in the desolate scene after a very hot fire. I do not remember exactly why we made the inspection, but we weren't there long before returning to Port Welshpool, where the boss bought a crayfish from a fisherman.

Alan Galbraith conducted unusual local firewood sales. Although departmental utilisation for poles and some sawlogs was well known, this firewood was an exception. By arrangement, the forest gang cut dry firewood and delivered it to householders with the district truck. This was the only service like that I ever struck. Presumably the sale price covered all expenses.

The former Inspector of Forests stationed at Warragul had not long been elevated to the position of chief fire officer in Melbourne, and I was astonished when the truck was loaded with prime firewood and driven to his house in a Melbourne suburb. This was not a sale, but I suppose there was profit in the fire chief being well-disposed to its officer in charge.

If grass on the other side of a fence is more attractive, sometimes bread from the baker in a nearby town is superior to the local loaf. The route of a forest vehicle often passed through Boolarra, where the baker was supposed to turn out better bread. In later times, at Heyfield, I found that Maffra bread was highly regarded by enough residents to support a daily run of a rostered car to fetch at least a dozen large loaves.

In the Mirboo district there were battlers trying to develop farms next to State forest. Shortly after I was trusted to drive the utility from time to time, I came across a man who had set fire to windrows on the block he wanted to turn into a potato paddock. It was a mild relatively calm summer's day, but the potential for a wildfire was there. He was a migrant from Sicily, and there were three women and some little children watching as I ticked him off about the fire as we stood near their humble dwelling. He had enough English to tell me he had not read or heard about fire restrictions, and had no radio. It was beyond him to extinguish the fires in the heaps. When I reported to Alan Galbraith and suggested it was an easy case for prosecution, he told me I had a lot to learn. Did I want a convicted enemy living at our boundary, or a new friend who reckoned forest officers were on his side? The forest gang kept a passing eye on his fires, the landholder knew he was being watched, the weather continued mild, and all ended well.

One morning I was told to tally some freshly-cut fence posts lying in the forest and then go to a remote dwelling near Darlimurla to collect the royalty on them. The boss warned me it was a very humble place, its owners being pleased at last to have a wall to wall floor. The pale woman at the door handed over the money, not much, saying her husband was down the paddock hooking ferns. I carried the sight of her skinny, unwashed children with sores on their faces, arms and legs for too long. I had no appetite for my sandwiches that day, and threw them away.

Some battlers on the land were aggressive. There was one family on a rough farm that police would not visit alone. When he had to go there the policeman from Boolarra called on a colleague from Morwell to go with him. On one occasion when there was danger of fire spreading, Derrick Rolland and his men waited for an armed police guard before they felt safe enough to go on to the land to hose fire in a windrow.

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## Social Life

Socially, Mirboo North was very quiet for me. Having no car, I could not explore the countryside. I could not dance and was a wipe-off at the tennis club. I did not attend a church. A bachelor public servant, and a bird of passage at that, was no prize guest in a small, strongly agricultural town. The Shire secretary and his wife were hospitable, and I got to know his assistant. I do not recall being lonesome: there was always an interesting book, and I was saving money for a car.

Did I see much of Derrick Rolland? Yes, but only at night. Believe it or not, I often visited him and his wife, Gwen, in the evening, arriving under cover of darkness. Had Alan Galbraith known I was hobnobbing with that fellow on the other side of the fence his reaction would have been explosive. Derrick and Gwen always made me welcome, but they must have shuddered when I appeared because I stayed longer than they wished, some bachelors being thoughtless. Derrick resorted to handing me the milk bottles to put out as a signal to leave.

## Transfer

My posting did not last a year. The Inspector arrived from Warragul one day and told my boss I was being transferred to Heyfield. Alan Galbraith obviously did not know beforehand, and protested about losing my services, also pointing out that I had invested in quarters. The Inspector dismissed that with no sympathy for a foolish investment in unapproved quarters. The boss smouldered in silence. Mrs Galbraith wept, just a little, when she came out of the house and heard I was going. Her husband was no longer very active and perhaps he had come to value what I did (and what he let me do) to help him run his district.

If my posting was meant to last for the summer and autumn only it would have been fair to be told at the outset, when I would have been content to stay on at the hotel.

When I thought about it I felt relieved about the transfer. The Heyfield Forest District was booming, with nine new sawmills. There were roads to be built to give access into the mountain forests, and there were something like 1200 square miles of forests to protect. I had got to know the forests and countryside of South Gippsland to the extent that my duties would allow, and I knew my work and opportunities at Mirboo would have remained much the same. Alan Galbraith did not want to think about any innovation that might imply his regime was lacking in essentials.

Leaving the hutment behind was not the end of the world. It was all my own doing that I had spent money and a lot of effort fixing it up.

During the next year or so, Alan Galbraith sent me sums of money which went a long way to balancing out the cash I outlaid. I am not sure how he sold off materials and equipment, but he no doubt did as the chance came up. I had assured him I had written the money off, and I did not expect to see any of it again. I knew better than tax him with questions.

I did not go back to visit the Galbraith's. I did not get a car until Mirboo North was becoming a little distant, and I reasoned that by then I was out of mind. For good or ill, I never did keep in close touch with work mates and friends after I had been transferred to another posting. What was past was past, and I always felt that I had not been important in their lives anyway. Much later, my view on renewing acquaintances altered, but for many of my former work mates it was too late to do anything about it. Of one thing I was sure in 1953, and am sure now, my friends who lived in the Plantations quarters were instantly reconciled to my absence, and pleased for me to have new opportunities in a challenging district.