

# **A SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC HISTORY OF FORESTRY WITHIN THE ACT**

Oral History Interviews

Transcript of Interview

with

**Bill Bates**

conducted by

Brendan O'Keefe

at the

Australian War Memorial

on 30 March 1995

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**ACT FORESTS**

*"More Than Just a Pine Forest"*

ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

INTERVIEWER:	BRENDAN O'KEEFE
INTERVIEWEE:	BILL BATES
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1 TAPE	1 Hour 28 Minutes

BEGIN TAPE 1 SIDE A

Identification: This is tape 1 of an interview with Mr Bill Bates, conducted by Brendan O'Keefe, recorded on 30 March 1995 at the sound studio at the Australian War Memorial. The topics covered on this tape are the history of forests and forestry in the ACT. End of identification.

Well, I'd like to welcome Bill Bates to the sound studio, to the interview and start off just by asking you, Bill, how did you become involved in ACT Forests in the first place?

I'd actually worked at the Uriarra Forest and I started there as fairly young doing normal forest work.

What time was this - or what year was this?

I actually started work in about 1949 and put in about eighteen months or two years mainly working at Uriarra and then I left for probably a two year period.

What attracted you into forestry work?

[I] just mainly liked outdoor work.

Did you have any background in it, or the family have any background in it?

No, none whatsoever till my Dad's father started there and I think he started in '47.

How did he become involved in it?

A friend got him a job there, just as a normal forest worker and then he went on to become - the term was a ganger, then.

Was he just back from the war or something?

No, we moved off a station up at Bredbo. He was working for a farmer. We just moved on.

The family decided to move to Canberra.

Yes. We actually moved to Uriarra. He retired, I think, in about 1958.

Did your family have anything to do with forest or timber or anything at all at Bredbo?

No, purely just came off working on the stations and things like that. It was a complete change of work.

What was Uriarra like when you moved there in '47?

Very quiet little village.

I'll bet.

There was only four forestry houses and one that used to be called the Maintenance, Roads and Bridges house. No water, no pressure water, only tank water. No electricity, and no sewerage, of course.

Who were the people that lived in the village at that period?

The Roads and Bridges bloke was a bloke by the name of Reg Hamilton and then there was the Forestry Overseer was Jim Bradley. The people who were living there was Albury Syphes, Tom Bateup and Dan McKenzie and a bloke by the name of Ernie Pigoli[?].

They had their families with them?

Yes.

How was life for the families at the settlement?

Pretty rugged. They used to have to make the school bus at the Cotter - had to drive their kids and make it to the ... that was the high school children. They had a school in the village there for the primary school.

A village school in Uriarra, yes. And the high school children had to go into Canberra.

Telopea Park was the high school in those days.

When you moved to Canberra or Uriarra had you already left school?

Yes.

When you started at Uriarra what sort of work were you involved in?

Just general forest maintenance work. We used to cut pines for the government sawmill which used to be down at the Causeway in them days. The timber was snigged by horse. I used to use the horse for snigging the logs out to the roadside.

How did you cut the trees?

Cut the trees with a cross-cut saw and cross-cutted them the right length.

It must have been pretty hard work.

Yes, much different to today's standards.

It would make you fit though, I'd imagine.

Yes.

How long were you involved in this kind of work at Uriarra?

I stayed there for eighteen months or two years and then there was a sort of industrial dispute because in them days I wasn't eighteen you weren't supposed to be employed till you was eighteen and they was paying us adult wages and so we had to go off.

So what did you do?

I worked for A.V.Jennings for a couple of years and then I came back.

You were building houses.

Yes, I started off as a brickie's labourer there and then I got a job of crane driver.

How come you could work for them if you ...?

There was no regulations on the private ... as long as you could do the work you was right.

So you worked for them for a couple of years and then what happened after that?

A.V.Jennings was sort of winding down a bit. I think there was a bit of a slump in the building market and then I got a job back with the forestry section on a construction gang.

Whereabouts was that?

That was a sort of mobile thing that used to go around the four forests and do all the road work and break work and things like that.

Fire break work?

Yes, fire break work.

How many were in the gang?

There was about eight of us and we had bulldozers and graders and trucks. I worked on that for awhile, just went on operating the compressor and jackhammer and that and then I got on to truck driving for a year or so, or two or three years.

When you working in the gang it must have been around the time of the big fire in '52?

It was.

And the wind blow in that year, too. Can you tell me your experiences of that period - what you did and so on?

The fire in '52, that covered Stromlo and was a pretty frightening experience. We also had fires back out in the north-west of the ACT in '52.



You were involved in controlling the fires and building the fire breaks for all this.

Yes.

Did you spend a lot of days in the field?

Yes, sometimes three or four days straight.

Just fighting the fires.

Yes.

What about the wind blow? Do you remember that very well?

Yes, that was in July '74.

I'm talking about the early one, in '52. There was another one later in that year after the fire, apparently.

Wind blow?

Yes.

Not an extensive one, I think, not like the one in '74.

So you worked on the road gang for a year or two and then ...

I came back .... That phased out that job and ...

How come?

Different policies on the work system and it phased out and each forest used to do their own after that - look after their own roads and there was more machinery bought and each forest used to look after their own roads.

That's interesting because I would have thought that they'd try to keep costs down by having just one set of machinery. Do you know why they decided to do that?

I think that was a decision where they couldn't agree on the policy, I think, of one gang going around doing all the roads. They wanted to work independent.

So the overseer at each forest just took over their little area.

Yes.

Hopefully somebody was coordinating all this up above.

Just one thing, you mentioned before about the horses in the forest. I meant to ask you about that. Can you just tell me - you were in charge of the horse teams?

At Uriarra we were the gang cutting pine for the government sawmill and you used to have to go and get your horse in the morning and feed it and take it out to where you were working and then bring it back of an afternoon and feed it.

How did you like working with the horses?

That was all right. I was really used to horses. I'd done a lot of horse work in the early days.

On the farm.

Yes, I was familiar with horses.

How long did the horses remain working in the forests?

Up until about '54 or so or '55 and then they started to bring in tractors then for snigging.

Were some of the contractors still using horses after that?

Yes. Probably not too much after that. Probably up till about '58 they were still - some of the contractors was still using horses.

Getting back to after you left the gang you were with and you went into truck driving, where were you based?

I was based at Uriarra.

Were you just working on the maintenance in that area?

Yes. In about '58, I changed from truck driving to a ganger.

Who were you working for at Uriarra, by the way?

The Forester then was Ron Slinn.

How did you get on with him?

I got on well with Ron.

Were there many other people working ...?

By that time there was lots of people there. They'd built more houses and we had heaps of immigrants come from over. There was probably sixty-five people working there by that time. We had camps at Blue Range, Lees Creek, Condor. There was probably fifteen to twenty blokes camped all over. There was huge gangs in them days.

How long did the blokes stay out in the camps?

They stopped there from one to two years and they gradually moved off as they learnt to talk English ....

So they were mainly immigrants?

Yes, but we also had a fairly large crew at the settlement itself. There are about thirty houses there now.

What about the facilities? Did they upgrade the facilities with water and ...?

Yes. In '54 they laid the water on and in about '52, I think, they got the power on; it was upgraded.

Made things a bit more comfortable there.

Yes.

And the school continued?

Yes

But the older kids, I guess, still had to go into Telopea Park or somewhere [inaudible].

Yes. Then they built a new school in about 1968, I think, at Uriarra, but that still only goes up to sixth grade.

What was life like for the fellows who were living out in the camps at Lees Creek and Condor and so on?

Pretty bad because we used to send the truck out and pick them up and take them to town one Saturday in a month.

Only one Saturday a month?

Yes, but we used to run what we used to call a ration truck twice a week to pick their supplies for them, but we used to run a truck in and that became very messy in the end because they'd all go to the pub and get drunk and start fighting and going on ....

Yes, I'm not sure I would blame them. So they were provisioned a couple of times a week with the truck, but other than that they just stayed there and worked at cutting or planting.

Yes. There was lots of tree pruning and general work.

Did these fellows resent being in the camps?

Some of them did, I think. Blokes that were married and that, they just settled into it and made the best of it and saved their money. A lot of them was learning to speak and things like that and getting themselves established and then they'd move out.

Did any of these fellows, to your knowledge, stay with ACT Forests or stay in the Forestry Section anyway after they ...?

One bloke Attilio Padovan, yes, he stopped on and retired.

You're now driving a truck and this is about the late '50s?

Yes, about '57 or '58, I think. Then I went off that and then I went on to a ganger. Ron Slinn took me off the truck and asked me to do this ganger's job.

Can you tell me what, first of all, your job involved when you were driving the truck and then what it involved when you became the ganger?

When I was driving the truck I used to cart pipes, fuel, gravel and mainly for roading and construction, and sometimes I'd take blokes out on the back of the truck to where they was working and drop them off and then pick them up again of an afternoon and things like that.

Sounds a bit easier than being a member of the road gangs. Anyway, so Ron Slinn appointed you as the ganger and what happened with that job?

When he appointed me a ganger we used to do all the clearing for preparation for planting. He put me in charge of two bulldozers and we had to do the clearing ahead for the planting season. So that went on for a couple of years and

...

You must have been clearing new areas, not areas that had been filled because there wouldn't have been any product.

New eucalypt areas and all that through Lees Creek. So I was on that for a couple of years.

So you basically bulldozed the trees down and then ...

Yes, I pulled them down with a cable.

Sounds like it could be a bit dangerous at times.

Yes, it was. Where I'd done was only myself and another chap looking after them and I went through, I think, about six offsidiers.

What happened to them?

A bit too rugged for them.

Too hard. Did you have any major accidents when you were out there?

No, rolled over a couple 'dozers and things like that but no personnel got hurt, not from machines or anything. A couple of the young blokes, the offsidiers, they strained their backs; it was just too heavy for them.



How many people were in the gang? I mean, you had an offsider; did you have any others?

Just two blokes driving the two machines, and myself and another bloke used to hook the rope up and that and pull the rope back.

You would have been out by yourself a fair bit or just with the gang.

Out by ...

... Ron Slinn would have come around every now and then to see what was going on.

He used to come around, couple of days or so.

Did you camp out?

No, always lived at home.

Were you married or anything by this stage?

No - yes, I was

I hope your wife doesn't hear this. Your wife was living at Uriarra?

Yes.

How did she feel about that?

For the first few years she was fairly lonely and that.

Was this in the early '50s?

Yes.

When it was a pretty small place.

Yes. Once we started a family, in '62, I think - my son was born in '62 - and that kept her busy.

After you pulled the trees down, did you just stack them up and burn them?

No, we just pulled them down and then in the Autumn we used to just put through a running fire, just leave the trees lying on the ground and light it and have a running fire. That was the system [in] them days; now we don't burn at all.

After the fire went through, did you leave it awhile before you planted?

Usually that same year we planted it and started probably burning about in April or March or something and then start planting in June/July.

As early as that? I thought you'd wait a bit longer.

No, usually get into it. See, once you put a fire through it, it cleans it all out and you get no rubbish on the ground then.

Why, pardon my ignorance, but did you plant at the beginning of the Winter?

That's the dormant time for the seedlings. Usually wait till you get about three or four good frosts on them to kill the seedlings - to stop them growing - and then you lift them and plant them out.

This was a highly successful operation?

Yes, we used to run our own nurseries in them days at Uriarra and Stromlo and Kowen.

The trees you were planting were *Pinus radiata*, I suppose.

Yes, all *Pinus radiata*.

What sort of distances or spaces were you planting?

Mainly 2.4m or eight feet apart, on the rows in them days.

What other work were you involved in when you were a ganger?

Mainly special jobs. I used to get all the special jobs and any experimental jobs and things like that, I used to do all them.

Experimental with new types of pine?

Yes, pine and any sort of specialised jobs - we used to always do them.

Do any of these stand out in your memory as being particularly interesting or a good result or a bad result?

Yes, one really stands out that I used to .... I done a lot of months, I went off on a construction gang - I was the ganger and then they put me in charge of the hardwood logging at Bulls Head; marking trees and looking after the hardwood logging. I went through on that till about '62, I think.

That was a full-time job for a while?

Yes, mainly a summertime job, and wintertime it used to get too wet, so Collis Brothers was cutting the hardwood and carting it to Canberra to the government sawmill down at the Causeway.

Collis Brothers? I don't think anybody has ever mentioned them before. Were they long term contractors in the forest?

Yes, they actually went through from about '48 to '62, Collis Brothers, on cutting the hardwood. They were long term haulers.

Obviously with a name like that they're not Italian immigrants or anything?

No, they come from Victoria.

Did they have other contracts in New South Wales and Victoria?

No, they had contracts in Victoria for logging and they come up here and the weather used to determine how long they could go up there. If they got an early winter or a late winter, that determined the logging time they was logging.

Were they using horses?

No, all bulldozers. They used to snig with the 'dozer and lay it on to the - they had five jinkers running sometimes there a day, carting logs in.

Why did they stop in '62?

Ran out of timber and the Soil Conservation people was starting to look into the catchment area logging.

So there's a lot of run-off from areas that they cut. They were cutting up Bulls Head, you said.

Yes, Bulls Head and right through to Mount Franklin.

So you were up in the Bulls Head area in the early '60s. What was the next move?

Next move was, I think, '63 or '64. They made me forestry overseer then.

Good. Whereabouts was that?

At Uriarra.

So you were in charge of the whole forest operation?

Yes.

How many people did you have under you then?

Probably about forty, I think.

Can you just give me a rundown on what sort of responsibilities you had when you became an overseer?

There were about three gangers, two leading hands, a carpenter. Used to have to organise them every day and allocate work out each morning. And, of course, we had fire duty as well - fire watch and fire crews to organise every day.

What was the division of responsibility between you as an overseer and the forester who was responsible for Uriarra?

Ron Murray was there then. Ron Slinn had left and Ron Murray was there. Ron was living there at the time and then he went off to America, I think, in '65. I was there on my own then for a good part of the time.

Nobody to tell you what to do.

No. I had casual blokes come in and things like that; they'd stop for two or three months and ...

Casual foresters?

While first Ron Slinn was there and then Ron Murray, did they work out what needed to be done that day?

Yes, it just became routine most of the time. There were times when there was something else needs to be done and they usually get the job and then just pass it on to you.

So when Ron Murray went off to the United States, obviously you must have known the job backwards by this stage?

Yes.

So they could leave you in charge. And the relief foresters that came out, they were a bit young and inexperienced.

They was only just straight out of school mainly.

Did you have much problem with these young foresters who were straight out of ...?

No, some of them got a bit funny and that.

What was funny about them?

The way they wanted to do things and the way that I wanted to do them. I used to just about end up winning most of the time.

Maybe they learnt a little bit of something practical, yes.



Some of them were really good blokes and didn't .... And then you got the bloke that came out and thought he knew everything, but they've gone them days.

Were you still living at Uriarra, you and your family?

Yes, I'm still living there.

And all your family grew up there?

Yes.

How many children did you and your wife end up having?

We've got three children.

How did they find living at Uriarra?

They liked it all right.

They didn't mind travelling into school each day when they got a bit older?

That was a bit of a bind, especially when they started to go to college because with college they have these semesters and they have the free periods. And if they have the free periods and they finish at one o'clock or something and they had to wait till four for the bus and that, that was a bit of a nuisance.

How long did the bus trip take in and out?

It was only about three-quarters of an hour. They all ended up going to Stirling College because of the school allocation and that.

What sort of recreation activities were there?

The boys played football and tennis.

At Uriarra itself though?

No, we used to have to take them into town.

So you were running a ferry service. What about the adults who were living out at Uriarra, especially in the '50s? Did you make your own entertainment out there?

Yes, we used to have dances. We had a recreation hall and we used to have dances and that there. We had tennis courts and that there. That was pretty good.

Did people go into Canberra on weekends?

Yes, one of the people opened a shop back in the '50s - had a small shop running there but they couldn't compete with the big shops in town. They used to have to go and pick up their stores and that.

That's the first time anybody has ever mentioned that.  
Who ran the shop?

Tony Franklin and Jean [?].

And they were going into Canberra and buying the stuff  
and bringing it out? They didn't have wholesalers  
bringing the stuff out.

No, they used to have to go and pick up their own supplies.

So they'd have to add on the price which wouldn't make  
them popular.

No.

How long did that last, do you remember?

Probably about twelve months.

Is that all?

Yes, that was back in the mid-'50s.

How did the Forestry Section feel about that? Did they  
frown on it or did they think it was a good idea?

I don't think they worried about it too much. They just  
added a small shed in their backyard and it was probably

highly illegal, I suppose .... They used to sell a bit of beer and things.

In the mid-'60s you found yourself as the overseer at Uriarra with no real boss, I suppose, or a succession of temporary ones, so you got on quite well there.

Somebody must have come in .... Another forester must have come in permanently then to run .... Did Ron Murray come back there when he ...?

He came back for a short period but he was only there for, I think, three months or something, and he moved to town and then another bloke by the name of Bob Cruttwell then for a while, and then a bloke, Bob Williams.

What were the major things that were going on in the forests at Uriarra at this time, while you were the overseer?

Mainly, from the mid-'60s through till the '80s, mainly replanting, second rotation planting. We started clear falling in '72 and so that got onto the second rotation work.

When did that start?

It started in '73.

So immediately after the clear falling.

Yes.

What was happening before that? - you were thinning.

Yes, just did general forestry work - pruning and road maintenance and road construction and just normal forestry maintenance.

What about the fire control measures, were you heavily involved in that, too?

Yes. In the bad weather, summer period, they used to have two lookouts going and two large tankers and three small units.

All under your control? Where were the lookouts placed, Ron?

One on Mount McDonald and one on Mount Coree.

How did they communicate with ...?

By two-way radio.

In those peak times of fire danger, was there somebody always standing by ready to receive any signals or messages from them?

Yes, they put through an hourly weather report through to the base station in town. That's on bad days, they go up about ten o'clock and finish about seven in the night.

And each hour they just report on the fire situation or ...?

Yes, or give a weather report and that report every hour and then report any smoke seen.

Did you have any major outbreaks in this period during the '60s and early '70s?

Yes, we had a lot of minor ones but '72, I think it was, we had a fair one up at Bulls Head there; burnt out probably a couple hundred hectares of bush.

Did you have much trouble controlling this fire?

Yes, it was a bad one - very rough country.

What did you have to do to try and control it?

We put in bulldozer trails and had heaps of small ones. At that stage we was looking after the whole of the catchment area going right back through to the head of the Cotter. We had a lot up through there - lightning strikes and things like that. [Inaudible] ... about 1958 or so, about 1958 or it might have been early '60, we had some out at the head of

the Cotter there. I spent a week there straight fighting, and then in '82 we had the big fires in the Gudgenby area. I spent six weeks out there, I think, on that.

Did you get to see much of your family in that period?

Not too much, no.

During the period of the '60s and early '70s who were the contractors who were taking the logs out at this time?

That's the normal pine logging? Rosin Logging, they was there, and who else now? - Belovic. There was Rosin, Belovic, I can't think of the others now.

About how many were there all up?

About five lots of contractors.

Were you directly responsible for supervising them?

Yes.

How did that work?

That was pretty straight forward those days. The big mill wasn't started out there until '72 - the Brown and Dureau, as it now - that never started until '72 so - mainly just

local market, and Monier and two or three other small mills there. Once the big mill got going at Hume there, that made a lot of difference to the logging in the ACT.

What did your role entail as supervisor of the contractors? Did you have to actually mark the trees?

Yes. Each forester used to have their own marking gangs. Used to have to go and mark the trees that they had to take out.

How come the foresters didn't do this?

No, they didn't think it was part of their job.

That's surprising. Why?

Some used to go out and do a bit. Ron Slinn, he used to go and do some, but what his name? - Attilio was my main marking bloke and he used to do all the marking at Uriarra just about.

So both you and he had been close for a long time and knew what trees had to be taken?

Yes, he was excellent.

And obviously the forestry people had confidence in your judgment.



Yes.

That's interesting. I'm a bit surprised that foresters wouldn't take a more active role in it. But when you had no - in that period when Ron Murray was overseas, you must have basically run that all by yourself without any forester.

Yes.

Did you ever have any problems with any of the contractors in taking the wrong trees or not cutting them the right length?

Yes, when [inaudible]. If they saw a good big one, they'll take it.

Even though it's not marked. Did much of that go on?

We'd give some a week or so spell now and again for taking a tree that was not marked.

So they'd have no work for a week. Did this happen very often?

Once they knew you was honest about it, they used to be honest, too. If they had a tree in the road, they'd ask you if you could mark it. If it was in the road of the tractor

or something and they wanted to get it out. They soon learned that if they take the wrong tree ....

I suppose, the loss of a week's income, they'd shape up pretty quick. That's interesting.

The fallers and cutters, they tend to be fairly murderous on some of the trees.

You mean they cut them fairly roughly.

Yes. But it doesn't take long to work out which ones should have stopped there.

How did you control the way they cut the trees? I mean, if they were cutting badly what sort of action did you take to ...?

Usually if they was cutting badly and making a mess, they'd have to brighten up their game or otherwise they was out.

Did any of them get the bullet?

Yes, plenty of them.

What? - whole contractors or just individuals.

Just individual fallers and that.

Where did these tree fellers come from? Were they just hired willy-nilly by the ...?

Mainly willy-nilly by anyone that had done some chainsaw work and that, we'd pick them up.

There must have been a bit of turnover.

Lots, very high turnover.

What was happening meanwhile with the camps that were at Lees Creek and Bulls Head and so on? When did they stop being used?

We had a camp at Uriarra as well, too, in the settlement there - down at the bottom of the settlement.

What period was that?

That went back through into the mid-'60s or probably nearly the '70s - that one at Uriarra.

Did this have mainly migrant workers, as well?

No, a lot of our blokes were camped there, as well. A lot of them moved to town and they used to camp there during the week and go home weekends. There was still some immigrants there, too. The ones in the Lees Creek, Blue Range, Condor,

Bulls Head, they would have probably phased out between '52 and '58, I think.

That's pretty early. So there was no further work for them.

No, we'd started to scale down on the single people because we'd built more houses at Uriarra and they had married families there.

What happened from about the early '70s onward? - you remained at Uriarra?

Yes, remained there till June '92.

I hadn't realised that. That's quite a long period.

It must be a record, I think.

Remained there till June '92 and now they've closed down Uriarra depot and Pierce's Creek and Kowen. That's one depot at Stromlo.

Did you leave of your own accord or just because it was closed down that you ...?

They transferred me over on to this logging supervisor's job.

When did that happen?

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

They transferred me over onto this logging supervisor's job?

When did that happen? That happened in '92, did it?

Yes.

So now you've got the whole - you're in charge of the contractors in all the forests?

Yes.

You'd have plenty of background in that, I guess.

Yes.

What changes have you seen in the way the contractors operate over the years?

A vast change in the mechanism of the output and the way they work - all the modern machinery, very few chainsaws. It's all machinery work.

Is there much wastage from the methods they use now?

We've got a problem with wastage because we haven't got a pulp mill close to the ACT.

So the wastage is just left on the ground and ground into the soil?

Yes.

I've seen the big tractor dragging the roller. I was wondering why that happened.

We try and get everything we can out of them but there is still a lot of waste.

Yes, they won't take the small stuff, or the mills won't take it, I suppose.

The mills won't; they can't utilise the small timber.

Does that create problems with the contractors? Do you have a running battle with them over the ...?

Yes, it's an ongoing thing every day to try and get the maximum of utilisation.

What about the people you were working for? I mean, you had Ron Murray but then he went overseas and then briefly came back and then Bob Cruttwell took over, and then who followed Bob?

Bob Cruttwell, I had Bob Williams, Len Currie....

These blokes were living out at Uriarra with you?

No, they always used to travel from town. No-one has lived there since .... Bob Williams lived there for a while.

This would have been the late '60s?

Yes, and early '70s.

But basically the foresters haven't lived there for a long time?

No, not since Ron Murray left.

Does that create problems with communication, or did it create problems with communication?

No. I've forgotten half these foresters; there's bloody heaps of them. There's been a lot go through.

So they came out every day to keep an eye on things?

Yes.

What about the blokes who were working for you? Did you have any great problems there at all?

Yes, just normal everyday .... We used to have a fair changeover of people, particularly back in the early '60s and that happened till about up into the '70s - they were stable a bit but we used to employ a lot of blokes through the CES and a lot of people - groups of people - would come and they'd put them on and they'd go all right for a couple of weeks. I can remember there were six of them there at one stage in the camp - single fellows there - and they went all right till they got their first pay then they all got on the 'turps'. I went down and put the six of them off in the one hit one morning. They wasn't very happy.

A lot of them, I suppose, wouldn't have been used to the physical work, either?

No.

It would be all right for a few days but then the muscles would start to fall apart. By a couple of things you've said, it seems to me you lent towards hiring married men, as well.

Yes.

It was a bit more stable?

Yes.



I gather this wasn't any written down policy, just something you learn over the time.

Yes, and we had the primary school and it was always an option to try and get people with families, to keep the school going and that.

What about the teachers that taught at the school? Did they tend to stay very long?

Yes, really. There was a bloke, Norman Cornwell there, he put in twenty-odd years, I think.

Gee, that's pretty good going. When did he start?

I think he started in .... He came back there as well. He started there and done a stretch and then went away and came back there again. It probably would be in the '30s, he started there.

That's really going back.

He came back and he finished in probably the '50s or late '40s there, he finished I think.

Just at the time your family was moving in. So he obviously lived there, too.

Yes, he used to camp there in a small hut up behind the school. He also used to go to Queanbeyan to stop a couple of nights a week and weekends and things. But he stopped there a good number of years. The teachers seemed to spend a good stretch there.

Who came after Norm?

We had a bloke - he lived there - Mick Demire[?]. He came in and he spent probably five or seven years there. Actually the chap that's there now, he's living there, as well. He's been there about five or six years, I suppose. There's been a lot in between.

The teachers don't mind taking a class with a whole range of ages?

Well, at this stage they've got an assistant with them, whether it be two and a half days a week or something. Yes, they usually make their bottom lines - about twenty is the lowest they can get down to, I think. They've got an assistant teacher with them then, I think, for two and a half days a week or something.

That's good. Any of these teachers female or were they all male?

Yes, there's been some female assistants. The girl used to drive from Brindabella down there every day to teach a few

years ago. She was assistant teacher. There's a few females that assist.

They didn't find any particular problems living out there? I suppose they had a lot of ....

Most of the female ones have been travelling from town out.

Right, so they don't live out there.

No.

I suppose it's a bit far out for them.

Bill, you said that in more recent times you became in charge of all logging operations in the ACT Forests. I was just wondering if you'd like to describe exactly what that job entails and so on?

The day to day supervision of logging contractors in the four forests: Uriarra, Pierce's Creek, Stromlo and Kowen, and also we'd just completed the clear fall in Jervis Bay forest on the south coast. That's been handed back to the National Parks now and no more forestry activities will go on there.

What trees were they harvesting down there?

*Pinus radiata.*

How does it grow in Jervis Bay?

It grows quite well there. We've just done 200 acres there of radiata clear fell at .... Started in April last year and ended up in November.

How long had the radiata been in down there?

Since about 1960, so thirty-odd years.

Thirty-four/thirty-five years, yes. Have you had much to do with Jervis Bay over the years?

Yes, actually Ron Murray and I went down and done some burning at Jervis Bay in '65, just after he come back from the States.

What was that for?

Preparation for planting; we done a running fire burn.

So that was radiata, too, you put in after that?

Yes.

But that's not going to be harvested now?

It's been harvested down there now.

That was part of the immediate job.

Yes, it's all one harvest down there now.

What's happened now that you've harvested the radiata, are you putting radiata back in just to let it grow or are you going to ...?

No, it's just going back to natural bushland now.

That's, as you said, under the control of ...

National Parks.

Have you had any other involvement with Jervis Bay, at all?

No, that was about the only involvement I had with - went down and did a burn off down there and then did this logging there in the last year for about six months.

Getting back to your job as being in charge of all the logging operations, how many contractors are you dealing with now?

About seven contractors - seven groups of contractors.

So, the number has gone up. I would have thought that they'd diminish, that they'd get bigger and there'd be .....

What's happened with them now, they have got two divisions of the contracts. Two groups have got two groups going.

What do you mean exactly?

There's one lot cutting at Uriarra and one lot cutting at Kowen but it's the same contractor. They've split the gangs.

Right. But it's the same company.

Yes, same company.

So how many companies are there?

There's only three companies.

What are they?

One's Rosin Logging.

Yes, the Rosins.

The BLC, that's the Brindabella Logging Company.

Who runs that?

A bloke, Arnie, he's a Swedish chap. And then there's Peter Kostian. He's another Swedish bloke. His trading name is DGR Logging.

How come the Swedes are involved in it?

I think they came out when this big mill started on the Monaro Highway and they've been into it since '72.

Are they Australian firms or are they backed by Swedish capital?

No, all Australian now.

So they live here, in other words?

They came out when this big mill was starting up and most of them worked with other contractors and they were established and got themselves into their own contract now.

I guess these days it's all very mechanised - a fully mechanised operation?

Yes, very mechanised.

I just wanted to ask you, too, about the move into logging of the steep areas. How did that get underway?

Back in '72 there was a firm - what did they call themselves? - Timberlift. They got cable logging going on the steep slopes by using the skyline.

Where did this company come from?

The main bloke who was in charge of it was Bob Smith. He used to design these skylines and build them himself. So it came from overseas. But they've gone out of them a fair bit because the cost of logging goes up by ten to twelve dollars a ton with the skyline. It's a lot slower and takes a lot more time.

What exactly is the skyline? Can you describe it?

It's usually built on either a tractor with a high tower on it. Cables run from the machine up to a spar tree on the top of the hill and the carriage running on the cable, as what they call the 'chokerman' up in the forest, hooking up the logs and the operator down at the tractor pulls them down to the bottom of the hill or up the hill, whichever the case may be. With the modern machinery now, they've got machines that can go up the steep slopes and fell the tree and use either a forwarder or grapple skidder for getting them down.

And that's cut the costs?

Yes, a lot quicker operation.



These machines must use an awful lot of diesel fuel?

Yes.

Do you know what their usage rates are?

Yes, I think they're probably eating six to eight litres an hour.

I also wanted to ask you about the big wind blow in '74, too. Did you have much involvement in the clean-up after that?

Yes, a lot of involvement in that wind blow.

What sort of things did you ...?

We had about, I think, 600 acres at Uriarra blow down and I was looking after all that. I had a truck going down the road every two minutes of the day - a load of timber.

Was this immediately after ...?

Yes, it went on for about twelve months afterwards. That happened on the 22nd of July, I think, 1974.

How long did it take you to clear all the fallen timber?

It took us about eight or ten months. It was a huge job.

I bet the mill managers were rubbing their hands with glee.

Yes. We were sending it everywhere, too. We were sending it down the coast, back through to Bombala, down to Moss Vale, Albury.

So you were keeping a lot of mills busy?

Yes, we had trucks going everywhere.

Did this end up in a - I hate to use the word - big windfall profit for the Forests?

Yes, we had a chap, the Logging Marketing Officer then, was Dave Fisher and he done an excellent job of marketing it all. He found sales for it everywhere.

Did you have to put on extra staff to ...?

Yes, we had a good number of people on at Uriarra, cutting it all the time, continuous. We had our own blokes on and contractors. It was just continuous there for about eight to ten months. Had trucks coming from all different parts of the place.

How did this - I know the mill managers loved it - but I just wanted to ask you how you got on with the mill managers, in general, around the place?

They were all sawmillers and they liked the timber as straight and big as they could get it. These days the diameters are causing a bit of a problem because they're too big; they can't handle them. Most of that stuff that we had blown down was the ideal size for them.

In diameter?

Yes, but places around here now, it's grown a fair bit since then. We used to talk to all the millers and things like that. We got on fairly well with them.

Do you have any problems with them refusing lengths that are too short or ...?

Yes, that happens occasionally when the contractors, if he's on the machines, on the processors, if his electronic eye gets out he cuts it too short or too long.

So it's all done by electronic eye?

Yes, that's on the processors but we've still got some handfallers. Sometimes they break their tape and end up with a short length or a long length.

And this causes a few problems?

Yes.

And what about twisted or knotty bits?

Yes, we've got a specification sheet that rules out large knots and different bends - bends in two directions are no good.

What do you do with this timber that's ...?

That's left in the bush.

And then you just get the big roller in and just ...

... chopper roll it.

When did that system start, by the way, with using the big roller?

Back, probably about '85, I think. Probably it's been going ten years.

What's the proper name for it?

Chopper roller. It's got knives along it.

It's an evil looking thing.

Yes.

But very effective by the look of it.

Yes.

I talked to Terry Connolly a little while ago and I'm just wondering; you must have had a good time with Terry, I suppose?

Yes, Terry was running the big mill out there for probably ten or twelve years or something, I think. I used to be in contact with Terry quite often. If we got a bad load of timber went in or something he used to ...

So he'd ring up and complain to you because you weren't controlling it properly.

Yes.

I bet that was fun.

Terry used to come out and have a look around the bush and see how things was going, as well. He was good to work with.

Also, I believe that when you first started in the Forests way back in the late '40s that Cyril Cole was still there?

Yes. Well, actually Cyril Cole, he started me when I first started. The Forestry Office used to be down where Canberra Hospital is there now - the Royal Canberra at old Acton. That's when the Forestry or Department of Interior, I think used to be then. He wrote my starting ticket out - for me to start - Cyril Cole.

Did you have much to do with him after that?

Yes, he used to come out regularly, just about once a week, and he used to visit the forests. Him and Dave Shoobridge was another chap, too. He was second in command to Mr Cole.

How did you find Cyril Cole?

Good, really good.

Easy to get along with?

Yes, if he wanted something done, he wanted it done.

You also mentioned earlier about the nurseries that you used to run and I'd just be interested if you'd give me a little bit of background on the nurseries, particularly around Uriarra.

We had one at Uriarra depot and one at what we call Blue Range camp and one at Lees Creek camp. Around September every year we used to plough them all up with a tractor and

then sow them with seed. Used to have a little hand seed sower and we used to plant the rows twelve inches apart and I think there was about fifty seeds per foot along the rows. We used to plough it all up and rake it. It was all done by hand in them days. Then we used to sow it with this little hand sower and we used to cover the seed with sand because the soils wasn't very good out there and then .... It used to take them about three weeks or a month to germinate - come up.

This was in the Springtime after you'd sown them?

Yes. And then the big problem used to come of weeding them - had to weed the nurseries. Sometimes we'd have to water them, which used to be a big task because of low water supply at Uriarra. Sometimes we used to have - at Blue Range and Lees Creek - we used to have to pump water from out of the creek and use sprinklers.

When you were running or dealing with the nursery at Uriarra and the water was low, this must have been in the period before you had reticulated water?

Yes, we used to pump out of the Cotter Dam and the pump could only pump so much.

How long after you sowed the seed did you plant out the seedlings?

Yes, you had to plant them out about June/July.

That's right. You mentioned that before; so they had about eight or nine months growth on them. Did you have much of a loss with them?

Sometimes we used to get bad strikes and other times it used to be good, depending on the weather and the season a lot.

Who actually ran the nursery side of things?

The overseer.

So that wasn't you in the early days, though?

No.

Who was that?

There was Tony Franklin and Maurie Franklin.

What about Lees Creek and Blue Range?

Yes, they used to look after the lot.

How long did these nurseries last for?

About 1960 they faded them out and then they started buying in plants from places like South Australia and Victoria.



Why did they do that?

Economic reasons, I think. About 1960 they developed another big nursery down at Stromlo where they had plenty of water and more area there. I think it would have probably been about the mid-'60s that phased out.\*

The Stromlo one?

Yes.

So we don't grow any of the seedlings?

No, we buy them all in now from Victoria and some from New South Wales.

Do you think that's a good thing to do?

I don't know. They reckoned they closed it down because of the economics of it and most of these are private people now growing the plants and they can do it a lot cheaper than we could. They're carting them in with a freezer van.

Is the quality of these things pretty good?

Yes.

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\* It actually continued until the late 1970s.

I suppose with the Lees Creek and Blue Range ones, the nurseries, a lot of the work would have been done by the migrant workers that lived there in the '50s?

Yes, a lot of the work was done by the blokes that lived in the camp.

And they would have done the planting out, too, I suppose?

Yes.

You've made reference to ... in September you'd sow the seeds in the nurseries and then you'd plant out in June. I'm just wondering if you'd give me an overall view of what the seasonal routine was like during the whole year - during the '50s and even into the 60s and a bit later.

We used to plough them up and sow them out and then the big task would be for weeding and watering.

This was in the nursery. I'm talking about the whole logging operation, or the whole forestry operation. So we start off with January or something like that.

We'll take January. It's usually a fairly hot month and quite a lot of fire duty. We'd probably have a period through till the end of March, probably heavily involved in

fire duty. Probably some of the chaps would be doing the road maintenance and road construction. And then in the Autumn, probably through till June, there's getting ready for planting: burning off; and getting the box ready for the planting season. And then through from June till sort of September most people would be involved in planting. And then in the Spring from September through till sort of November, just doing fire break preparation: cleaning the fire breaks and general maintenance work.

You said in the early days you were also involved in some felling or pruning and thinning. When did you carry this sort of work out?

That was mainly through the Summer months - pruning and thinning. A lot of blokes when they're on fire duty they have the truck out with them and they'd work along the edge of the road with the pruning and thinning around the compartments.

These days you're very heavily involved in the fire control work, too, I believe.

Yes, still fairly well. We've got a lot less people these days.

Why is that?

The economics again. Quite a few of our people are tied up on fire duty. It's become very dry this year again since the end of January.

How long have you been involved in this fire control work? - ever since you became head of the logging operations or ...?

No, I've been involved with it since I started just about.

Right. And you're still on call for fires?

Yes. Actually, when I first started I used to do patrols on horseback at Uriarra - fire patrol on horseback.

Was this before they had any lookouts or anything?

Not before they had lookouts. They had one lookout at Uriarra and one at Pierce's Creek. I used to do fire patrols on horseback.

Was this a daily occurrence during the hot months?

Yes, mainly weekends.

You were out all weekend?

Yes.

Camp out somewhere away from home?

No, I used to do a patrol up to Blundell's Farm and out through the Vanities Crossing.

Have you had any bad fires in recent years? I think '84 or '85 was a pretty bad year.

'82 was - we had a really bad year. Burnt out 35,000 hectares out in Namadgi Park. That was a very bad fire.

Did you have any bad experiences in controlling these fires?

Yes, you've got to be extremely careful where you go. I've been around for a while and I know the country reasonably well.

You've had a very long career in forests, in fact I think you were telling me over a cup of coffee that you were recently reported as the longest serving person with ACT Forests.

Yes, I think that came out in the bulletin there a couple of weeks back.

What? Forty-six years.

Yes, it will be forty-six.

Do you think you'll make the fifty?

No, I won't get to fifty, not unless they extend the age limit.

Just looking back, what are the main changes you've seen in the Forests in the time you've been - in all those years you've worked in such a place?

The development of new technology and things has really gone ahead, especially in the machinery line; from doing the hard slogging to what we can do today is a vast difference. The real hard work has gone out of it.

What about the changeover from ... it seems to have become a far more business orientated exercise? Have you noticed that and has that brought changes in the way you've worked or the way you've approached the work or anything like that?

Much changes in the way that you worked.

In what way, Bill?

Going out and getting into things manually - you've just got to think of a different aspect altogether. The new technology has ....

So what wouldn't have been possible before is now ...

No, no hope of doing it before.

What about the opening of the forests and the recreational usage? How has that affected your job or your work?

It's pretty good for a lot of the people that look after the forest but we've still got a few people that don't and we get a fair bit of vandalism and things like that around.

Vandalising what exactly?

The picnic areas, the barbeques.

Were you involved in the development of the recreation areas?

Yes, I think it was about 1965 we first started to open up the forests for recreation.

Do you think in general that's a good thing or has it created more problems than it's worth or what?

It's certainly created a few problems but if it's only a percentage of the public that create the problems, it's much enjoyment for a lot of the people that can go out and have a picnic or a barbecue out in the forest and treat it as a nice day.

You couldn't very well keep the people out these days, anyway; it's impossible.

No, that's another problem.

Looking back over a long career in the Forests, how would you say you've enjoyed it or haven't you?

I've must have enjoyed it. I enjoyed it up till '92.

What were the things that you liked about working in that?

When I was overseer at Uriarra it was a lot better, different things, changes in work. There was a never dull moment in the day's work. Since they've centralised this depot, it hasn't been as enjoyable.

You're in town all the time now?

No, usually travelling around the contractors all the time.

What isn't it so enjoyable, just as a matter of interest?

You haven't got the variety of jobs whereas, when I was at Uriarra there'd be probably four or five different jobs going on in the one day.



So what do you do now?

Just purely looking after the logging contractors.

So this is what you do all the time when you're not out fighting fires?

Mm.

But generally speaking you've had a pretty good time?

Yes.

No regrets.

No, no regrets up till '92, at all.

Just looking back again, can you single out anything that stands out as the achievement that you'd be proudest of, that you remember most and you think is a thing well done and well worth doing?

I think it might have been the wind blow in '74 - cleaning that up.

Are there any other outstanding events that you remember - things that stand out in your mind - your experiences in the forests and so on that are

particularly striking events or significant events that you remember?

No, not in particular. I suppose because I've been in it so long that they're all pretty much the same, I think.

You've seen it all. Well, look on that note I think we might conclude the interview. I'd like to thank you very much, Bill, for coming along and giving us your memories.

That's all right, thanks very much.

Thanks a lot.

END OF INTERVIEW