

A SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC HISTORY OF FORESTRY WITHIN THE ACT

Oral History Interviews

Transcript of Interview

with

Professor Lindsay Pryor

conducted by

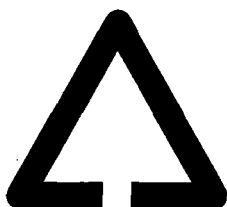
Brendan O'Keefe

at the

Australian War Memorial

on 2 August 1994

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ACT FORESTS

"More Than Just a Pine Forest"

ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

INTERVIEWER:	BRENDAN O'KEEFE
INTERVIEWEE:	PROFESSOR LINDSAY PRYOR
DATE:	2 August 1994
SUBJECT:	ACT FORESTRY HISTORY
2 TAPES	2 Hours

BEGIN TAPE 1 SIDE A

Identification: This is tape 1 of an interview with Professor Lindsay Pryor, conducted by Brendan O'Keefe, recorded on 2 August 1994 at the sound studio of the Australian War Memorial. The topics covered on this tape are the history of forests and forestry in the ACT. End of identification. I welcome Professor Pryor to the sound studio of the War Memorial.

Thank you, pleasure to be here.

That's good. I'm glad you could come. I'd like to start by looking at your background, and if I remember correctly you hail from Adelaide.

Yes, I'm one of the aggressive South Australians that left the State for its own good. I was born in South Australia and lived in Adelaide until I was eighteen and then came to the Forestry School in Canberra in 1934. So that established my connection with the ACT.

Why did you become involved in forestry? What was the attraction for you?

This has been put to me recently a number of times and I think it went like this. When I was about twelve my father read an article by N.W.Jolly, Norman Jolly, in the South Australian newspaper which said forestry was a good field

for boys - good profession for boys - and I was taken by this. The macho image appealed to me and so at the finish of primary school when the same question was put: what are you going to do, Lindsay? To every question I said, 'I'm going to become a forester'. From then on I always answered the question that way and followed through to do the preliminary science course in Adelaide - part of the forestry course for the degree, given by Adelaide, to be followed by two years at the Forestry School in Canberra. So that's how it came about.

Your father had no connection with forestry or anything.

No, he'd been in mining. There is a bit more, perhaps you don't mind me adding. We lived, I as an infant, at Moonta in South Australia where the copper mines are, and the School of Mines in Moonta, an off-shoot of the School of Mines in Adelaide, opened in the 1890s and my father was a pupil there - incidentally along with his father at the same time - education having come to Moonta then and attended the School of Mines. One of the teachers, I suppose, we'd call it, was Norman Jolly, a South Australian also, who was the first South Australian Rhodes scholar who had later graduated in forestry from Oxford; that was after the mines business. So my father knew Norman Jolly from having been in front on him - as a student in front of a teacher - and knew something I think of Norman Jolly's antecedents and family; nearly all South Australians knew one another. So

when he'd written the article it was though he was reading something from somebody he knew and regarded as authoritative, so it had that kind of element.

There was no influence on you from your knowledge of the lack of timber resources in South Australia. I mean, this led to the establishment of a Forestry School in the university there, I know, but this had no real influence on your taking up forestry, you think?

No, except that by then the radiata pine plantation program in South Australia was significant. It wasn't very big, of course, but it was going and the plantations were there and some timber was being cut from plantations, particularly those in the north, as they called it, near Wirrabara and Jamestown and so it was seen to be a coming industry. It had got far enough to be established at that stage.

And then you started your basic science courses at the University of Adelaide. This was at the time when the Forestry School was being set up in Canberra and the Adelaide University school was shutting down.

It was all a fait accompli because - if I've got it right now - the opening in Canberra was in '27, I think, the school having been started in Adelaide in '26 to replace the foregoing Department of Forestry at Adelaide University.

Sorry, that's what I was referring to.

Yes, and so it was '32 when I started the course. That had been, to me, it seemed a good while, but it had been established by then. The state universities, except Victoria, had all agreed to support the federal Australian Forestry School in Canberra, so that was the situation.

So how much forestry training did you actually do in Adelaide before you came to Canberra?

Very little in any academic sense. The course was the first two years of a science degree which was incorporated into forestry, but we had the opportunity to work on the plantations in South Australia during vacation which I did so that in 1934, I know, the one that was most accessible to Adelaide was Kuitpo, K-U-I-T-P-O, up near Meadows in the Adelaide Hills. And so I spent a week, I suppose, or something of that kind first, and then at different intervals in simple tasks like weeding the nursery

Sounds exciting.

Came to be called 'sucker bashing'. I got there, of course, by riding a bicycle from home where I lived and we had a modest camp there and there were just a few of us. That's the way it was done in those days.

Can you just give me an idea of the subjects you studied in Adelaide before you came to Canberra?

There were some requirements in forestry - there were some flexibilities - so it was the basic things like Maths, Physics, Chem. and Botany. And then I spread my wings a bit into the second year and I did Organic Chem. and Botany II and Geology and Zoology and then lacking Surveying I, which was a requirement for the course, I did that after doing the Forestry School course by private study and sat an examination in Perth in 1935 so that I had the qualifications behind me for the Adelaide degree when the time came - if and when it came.

So after two years in Adelaide you moved across to Canberra.

Yes.

What year was that?

That was in 1934 - the beginning. It might interest you, if I just digress for a second, to say that it was Depression times and students were required to get nomination of a State to attend the Forestry School and Julius[?], the Conservator, in South Australia was unable, although he professed himself willing, to give me a nomination. A nomination, of course, carried a modest living allowance of two pounds a week and that was rather significant. So in 1933 I wasn't much good at Australian Rules but I thought I'd play some rugby which was just starting and that provided a trip to Sydney. There was method in these

things. My colleague from South Australia, Bill Sharp, who unfortunately was killed in the war and I reached Sydney with a rugby team and we both waited on Norman Jolly who was then Chief Commissioner of the Forestry Commission. I don't know whether Norman had a soft spot for South Australians but we finished up our interview with him; he said, 'I'll nominate you to Canberra'. So we went back to Adelaide with our nomination in our pocket and thumbing our noses at the South Australian Conservator, so that broke my ties with South Australia. When that was arranged I came as a regular student like the others then with the promise of a living allowance to the Forestry School and I arrived in, as I've said on one other occasion, I think it was 3 March 1934 and the next morning walked up to the top of Black Mountain.

That was energetic. How many people were generally nominated from each State to the Forestry School?

They were quite variable. Sometimes it got as high as half a dozen but mostly it was two or three and there were two of us from South Australia, then. It was difficult, of course, because the Depression then and they weren't very free with nominations. There were occasions when there were four and five from the one State; a two-year course, of course, so that they would overlap so that the numbers might have been from one State six or seven but they were all very small. In my year there were only four students.

From all around Australia?

Yes, plus the other year so that we had about ten in the school as the total student population - something like that.

So two South Australians in your year and two from other parts of Australia.

Yes, one from Victoria and one from Western Australia.

So you arrived in Canberra in March 1934. How did you find the place when you first landed here?

Very easy to get around - open and nothing to impede movement by foot or bicycle, and less than 10,000 people and quarters at the old cubicles which had been used for construction in Canberra which were our living quarters out at Yarralumla in Solander Place. Altogether, rather pleasant.

You were able to survive on two pounds a week.

Yes, we were paid fortnightly; we got four pounds less ninepence a week for unemployment relief, so we got three pounds eighteen and six a fortnight. Yes, it was quite enough.

You undertook the two-year course at the School of Forestry and who were your teachers at this stage?

The school had been set up and the course was one that independently gave a Diploma in Forestry and that was incorporated into the system through Adelaide University for the degree with one or two extras. C.E. Lane Poole was Acting Principal; he was Inspector-General of Forests - a reluctant principal. He regarded himself as being - I've learned subsequently - saddled with teaching which he didn't want to do because a principal of the school had not been appointed and wasn't until quite a bit later. There was a modest staff: Lane Poole and then Charlie Carter from Victoria who had taken a Masters in Yale in Forestry, who taught dendrology, particularly the botanical aspects of forestry; and Hugh Richard Gray - Dick Gray, as he was known - had graduated in Forestry from Oxford who was teaching management and economics. We got lectures in engineering from - who was it now? - Max Jacobs who'd come back from overseas and he gave lectures in engineering aspects of forestry and processing of wood: drying, kiln drying, seasoning and sawing and that sort of thing. There were some special subjects given by guest lecturers from within Canberra, such as entomology by Fred Holroyd[sic]* from CSIRO Division of Entomology and Colonel Goodwin - J.T.H. Goodwin - who gave lectures in surveying which were rather impressive. That was about it. There might have been one or two other special lecturers, too.

I can't quite figure why you had to go to Perth to do your surveying exam if you were being taught surveying

* This was actually Dr F.G. Holdaway.

by Colonel Goodwin as part of the forestry course in Canberra.

Yes, the university in Adelaide would not accept surveying done in another course. It had to be the Surveying I course as prescribed in Adelaide and you had to sit that exam and pass it. They wouldn't give you credit for work done, even if it were a similar standard. There wasn't all that much difference. It was a little less the school course, bit more specialised but it wasn't all that big a jump to do the course at Adelaide although it did involve doing some extra work such as what we used to call 'star ob.' - star observations and so on to fix azimuth and latitude and things of that kind. I always rather enjoyed that because it always left with me a very considerable interest in the night sky. That was why it was necessary and perhaps a little later I can tell you how it came to be in Western Australia.

You would have finished at the Forestry School towards the end of 1935.

Yes, and in 1935 they brought together the field camps and it was spent in Western Australia because Lane Poole wanted to attend the Commonwealth or what was the old name?

Imperial.

The British Commonwealth Forestry Conference in South Africa where he'd been much earlier and he had to go by ship from Perth and so the school year was re-arranged so that the students were all over there working in the Jarrah bush for two camps, brought together in time. He did his stint for a while to kick things off and then departed and the rest of us stayed there with Max Jacobs running the camp as the major-domo. The examination had to be contemporary with the one in Adelaide in surveying so that I had to - I think it was about November probably - had to travel by train from Dwellingup to Perth to go to the University of Western Australia at Crawley to sit the exam there at the same time - two hours later - than they were doing it at Adelaide. But I wasn't good enough on telephones to do anything about it.

You obviously passed the forestry course and the surveying course and you ended up with a Diploma in Forestry and a degree from the University of Adelaide simultaneously.

The way it was designated, it was Bachelor of Science (Forestry); they tacked on the For. in the formal designation of it, but the diploma was not awarded until you had done one more year as a practising professional forester so that followed in 1936. By 1937 I was cast out on an unsuspecting world.

When you finished at the School of Forestry towards the end of '35, you basically had almost like a year of internship, I suppose, to use the medical analogy.

Very much - a very good analogy, indeed. Perhaps I should say what happened. I was a New South Wales student, you might recall, so I returned to New South Wales at the beginning of '36 and was immediately sent with other students, including Bill Sharp and one or two others, to Queensland because New South Wales then there'd been a palace revolution. No, not palace, there'd been a real revolution and Jolly had gone and he wasn't reappointed. It was done that way. It was a term appointment - the Commissioner - and E.H.F. Swain who had been Commissioner in Queensland became Commissioner in New South Wales, and Swain considered that the only good forestry was done in Queensland and all the young fellows should do is go up there and learn. So in January 1936 I was on the train to Brisbane and then into a camp a bit beyond Bundaberg on forest survey and then after three months there, another three months in a place called Widgey which is just out of Gympie on rainforest surveying with Neil Cromer who later became Director-General of Forests here in Canberra. I was the field party and he was the one on the booking end of the train and I was on the front end of it, pulling it. That took me to mid-1936 and a position was advertised in Canberra for Assistant Forester and I applied for it. We were working under the bonding system which was in force as it had been for teachers.

I was going to ask how you could apply for this job if you still had six months of your year of formal training to go.

Yes, and also I had a five year service period with a bond. Nevertheless I applied for the job and I was offered it. Then, of course, I had to negotiate the financial matter of the bond. People think differently. Bill Sharp was in the same position, he did the same thing. Bill didn't pay them back a penny. I had rather cold feet and thought I'd better pay it back so I did and elected to pay what they wanted. The Federal government helped me with half so I got the equivalent of one year at the Forestry School instead of two, so I had to pay back one year which was approximately a hundred and fifty-three pounds, sixteen and twopence. I elected to do that as soon as I could, so I paid the maximum and I think I paid it off within the two years because I was doing field work in ACT anyway and out of town and camping and so on.

When you started with ACT Forests, was Max Jacobs the head of ...?

No, Max had by then left and was working federally and was overseas in fact. He returned during the time. No Cyril Cole - no, I'm sorry, that was a bit earlier at the school. Cyril Cole, C.R. Cole, was in charge of forestry in the ACT. The old school tie was working and Cyril had been Forester

or Arborer[?] in South Australia, so there was a real mafia of South Australians about.

Why did you apply for a job in ACT - just because it came up or was there some particular attraction about the ACT?

I can't really tell you that except it would have to be completely in confidence. You see, I had a girlfriend here. That can be put as 'see footnote' in a page which may be consulted upon application.

No, I'll put it at the head of the chapter, I think.

So indeed, I had what I think for people of my age then, I was about twenty/twenty-one, you could say it was a rather compelling reason. In fact we were married later.

Congratulations. The same year or

No, fair go.

After you paid off the

You remember when that was; that was three years later.

When you started working for Cyril Cole what were your initial duties as Assistant Forester?

Cyril was like me, on a learning curve, so he really hadn't thought out the way he might integrate a professional assistant into the job because he was the only professional forester. It was at the end of the period where people were very conscious of the ranking and the control so there was no early move to provide all the trappings of authority and so on. History, as a matter of fact, changed this dramatically but in fact the first things that I did there were to be out in the bush and places like Uriarra and Kowen were out in the bush because you couldn't travel every day; bicycle was the main method I used for a start. I used to go out and camp for the week, sometimes for the fortnight, depending on where I was. So I was involved in a number of different kinds of survey, a good slab of which was defining the areas for the oncoming planting.

Of pines, mainly.

Yes, pine planting, but also quite a slab of work really on the Brindabella Range in the Lees Creek and adjoining areas, Bushrangers Creek in which there was some hardwood logging going on. It was rather a pleasant mixture from the point of view of the person doing it and in the latter one I camped at Bulls Head and then I certainly only came in once a fortnight because that was really well out of the way. That went on for a year or two and Cyril Cole must have complained to his senior officer, who was J.C. Breckenrigg[?], in charge of the section of agriculture and forestry, about being a bit overworked and not having enough

help. Breckenrigg told him he better use his assistant more effectively, I believe - I'm reading between the lines. It did make a change and that probably was not until about three years because then after I was married I lived in a house in Canberra, in Griffith, and I was provided with a motor cycle to get to work, an AJS three and a half, and I was still young enough to want to ride a motor cycle so that was no hardship.

Where did you live before you got married and into the house in Griffith?

I stuck at the Forestry School mess out at Yarralumla so for those three years, '36 to '38, I was in touch with the student body more or less, acting and behaving a bit like a student, I suppose.

When you first got into ACT Forests what was the extent of pine planting that had been carried out to that point?

The South Australian influence had been strong. At the conclusion of Weston's time with the Afforestation Branch, as it was called, which covered forestry and city parks - he finished in 1926 - the Forestry Section, as it was then, of the Department of the Interior, Property and Survey Branch, was set up and an appointment was made to be the Forester, and that was G.J. Rodger. He spent a year, maybe a bit of '26 and some of '27, planting at the initial plantations in

the Cotter, that is, Uriarra and Pierce's Creek, and Kowen. Stromlo already had the 500 acres as the top of the hill established by Weston. In 1928 Jacobs succeeded Rodger, who moved, I think, to New South Wales, and he had the quaint title of Forest Assessor and he was in charge of the unit for all of the planting year of '28 and he put in plantations in the same three localities and Stromlo, so there were four localities 1928 plantation was established. He moved on to his overseas work and Cyril Cole was appointed Forester in 1929 and he started planting and some of the laricio pines still standing at Pierce's Creek - for example, the Corsican pine - were planted in Cyril Cole's day and one or two little patches over at Kowen are still there in the preserved area. So then he continued and it became Depression, I suppose, in '29, so that in the years '30/31 and on to '34, and by '34 when I arrived in Canberra forestry was rather big business in terms of number of men because there was relief work and pine planting was quite a substantial activity so that the plantations - and this had got going by '32 - the plantations of 1932/3 onwards were rather large, particularly in Pierce's Creek and Uriarra, and that was the situation when I saw it in '34 and then it had gone a few steps more by '36.

Mentioning the relief workers, I was going to ask you how many people were working in the forests when you started? - if you can give a rough estimate.

I've got to be careful here. I find that having to do this I sometimes blur the records with numbers. The section had Cyril Cole and myself as professionals and then there were people in charge of each of the plantations as foremen. There was Jim Bradley at Uriarra, there was Harold Tuson at Pierce's Creek, Tom Southwell at Stromlo and Arnie[?] McInnes at Kowen. I suppose at times there would have been ten to twenty men under the Uriarra/Pierce's Creek group - smaller numbers at Stromlo. It was the time when married men were getting

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It was a time when married men were getting alternate weeks work and single men getting one in three, so the numbers - well, they may have been relatively constant but I can't remember exactly what they were but the gangs were of significant size. I'd say gangs of about twenty so there could have been about forty or fifty people working at the labouring level at that time.

They would have been able to plant a lot of pines.

The planting rate was, and more or less still is, about 1200 a day and 680 to the acre at eight by eight feet was the figure; doubled that would be two acres a day. They were fairly large blocks. The Pierce's Creek, Hardy's block and

the areas at Uriarra were several hundred acres. I expect they were 500 acres each; a thousand acres, I think, would have gone in. That must be recorded and I must say: check those figures. They're something of that order.

You mentioned the South Australian influence - the South Australian mafia, in fact. Were Rodger, Jacobs and Cole all from South Australia?

Of course.

Simply because they'd been trained in the era when there was only the Forestry Department

Rodger was the 'old school', Jacobs was the last student of the Adelaide University school, and Cole, like Rodger, had graduated at the early part of the first war and then enlisted and was in Europe, in France. Rodger I know less about in that way but he also had graduated, too - at least, he was Adelaide 'old school'.

Can I ask you if and how the Adelaide influence affected forestry in the ACT - the way forestry was done in the ACT?

Just like a photocopier. I think Cole's appointment was because Stromlo plantations from Weston's days in 1915 had reached the stage at which some sawmilling was going to start or had started, and Cole had been at Wirrabara forest

- which I visited last year, as a matter of fact - where there had been a sawmill running from somewhere around the turn of the century from plantings done by Walter Gill and the other well known after that forester whose name will come back to me soon, so that they were about 1880s and so they were being milled and a small amount of timber produced. Cole was running this little sawmill at Wirrabara which is still a little sawmill at Wirrabara; it was last year. So he was deemed to - this is to some extent supposition on my part but it fits in - as experienced in sawmilling of radiata pine. Indeed during his time the sawmill at Kingston controlled by the Controller of Stores, who was Charlie Francis in those days, was a going concern and things like therefore the way in which contracts were let for the harvesting of the trees and the recording of the wood taken and the computation of the accounts and that sort of thing was a repeat of South Australia.

What about the hardwood mill up in the Brindabellas from about 1930?

That was a less, in some circumstances one would say, sophisticated but it's not quite right here, it was a very simple little mill and it was much easier to handle that. The logs were coming to Kingston and the system was not as intensely managed as the pines were. However, that had no paradigm in South Australia; this was based really on New South Wales practice with hardwood forestry. The sawmiller

there whose name I do know but can't recall for the moment had come in from somewhere nearby.

How did Rodger's successors, Jacobs and Cole, how did their South Australian training affect the management of forestry in the ACT?

Some of the standards which were used, that is, things like spacing, number of tree species which was all radiata, of course, and thinning and pruning and methods of fire control, of course, was always a very substantial activity - these were all based on South Australian experience from each of them. The northern forest in South Australia, up around Jamestown/Wirrabara, of course, there's a pretty hot summer and fires were very seriously taken notice of there, so Cyril Cole certainly would be recreating some of the arrangements more or less for involvement of local land holders and so on. There was another South Australian who was the Secretary, I think he was called, of the Forestry and Timber Bureau, under Lane Poole - Roy Kappler - who had come here. He, of course, was well up on the legislation dealing with lighting of fires and fireplaces and all that sort of aspect, too, so that was South Australian in general basis.

You yourself were a fire control officer or Chief Fire Control Officer at one period.

Things moved on and by 1939 with the outbreak of Second World War, Cyril Cole was absolutely intent on serving in the Forestry Company; so was Lane Poole. Lane Poole, however, was rejected. He was selected for the commission and the Forestry Company, but this was vetoed by the Minister of the day who was Street perhaps - whichever one it was, anyway - and he didn't take it very well; he didn't like it. Cyril Cole then was next in line and he was commissioned to be Commanding Officer of the Forestry Company and spent the next three or four years away in Europe, mainly cutting pines in Scotland, but that was the way it went. One of the conditions of Cyril Cole's accepting or being offered the commission and accepting it, was that I remained as Acting Forester. So in 1939 or I think it must have been - yes, the end of '39 - Cyril Cole went and I became Acting Forester and continued in that post for the next four years. One of the concurrent appointments was as Chief Fire Control Officer in the ACT, so I had that post for four years; that's how they came about.

I noticed you'd done some work on burn scars on snowgums during the '30s and you produced some very interesting results on bushfires, back to about 1860 in Canberra. Can you ...?

Yes, not in Canberra so much, in the ACT. That was weekend work. I was camped up at Bulls Head and I was interested in that sort of thing. In fact, I did most of the fieldwork that led to a Masters degree while I was up there, too, on

the plant ecology of the ACT. The periodicity of fires and the evidence you can get from burn scars was a very potent source of information because there aren't many eucalypts, of course, that have got decent growth rings, but the cold country ones, above about 3,000 feet altitude, are very good and the snowgums especially so. So I chopped into the scars and the overgrowth tissue and counted the rings and made that little note which apparently got into circulation in a big way after the '39 fires.

Yes, I was coming to that. Were you Chief Fire Control Officer when the '39 fires broke out or was that ...?

No, it was the end of that year. Cyril Cole was still Chief Fire Control Officer because it was Friday, January 13, 1939. The ANZAAS science meeting was on and there was a garden party at Government House that afternoon and I was at that, but by nightfall that evening I was out at Uriarra with an undisciplined horde of men going to attempt to stem the flames. I finally was able to return home by about ten o'clock the next morning, after being there all night. Very fortunately there were no serious injuries. The people that I was concerned with were split on either side of the fire when it crossed the Brindabella Road in the plantations. It burnt about three and a half thousand acres which, of course, was a terrible blow to Cole, but fortunately the wind was very high and the fire was rather narrow and it didn't spread very much to the sides. I had my motorcycle there and finished up on the Uriarra side and then as it

subsided a bit early the next morning around dawn I rode up the road through it, testing the fire as I went but it had burnt down enough not to be dangerous, and rode through to the other side and contacted, with much relief, the group of a dozen or so who were there. By Sunday it was one of those days with cloud at about four or five thousand feet and things were all subsided and I rode up along the Brindabella Road as far as I could get along the range to see what had happened and there was enough break in the weather for everything to subside fortunately. So that was a good introduction to fire. I know at one stage - I only learnt this in retrospect - they were looking for me and I think they were wondering whether the next thing would be a memorial but it didn't happen.

How did the gangs fight the fire?

It was pretty primitive. After that event there were a lot of adjustments made but the idea was that it was largely hand work, there were no machines; you had rakes, and the usual thing was to make some sort of a trail that you could burn back from. So the idea was to plan some trail which would be a back burning trail and then light up. It depended very much on the weather. Actual putting out of fire directly was simply mostly by rakes and beaters, so you could imagine how much could be done. It was almost futile, really. Of course, you could stop things building up if the weather would let you. After that there were several innovations. The Commonwealth leased a wide strip of land

along the western boundary of the ACT and I think may still have that lease so that there could be control over the fuel hazard reduction burning which was one of the causes of the trouble. Radios which were still pretty crude then and heavy, they were introduced so that we had radio communication which was lacking before. There was a development then also, particularly after the war years I suppose or even partly during, of much more sophisticated pumps and so on and some modest types of fire tanker with water so that the move was in the direction that is now, of course, unrecognisable in relation to the starting point but the principles were then set up, really stimulated by the '39 fire.

Yes, I was going to say you really get the impression from the literature of that period that the fire was an enormous shock, but it produced a lot of good in the long run or even in the short run.

I learnt one thing on that of a slightly different kind. After the fire had gone through and at Uriarra that following morning, Cyril Cole was still there - he'd come out there I suppose, he'd been on the telephone somewhere I expect - and he was greeted by two more South Australians, one of whom was visiting from Western Australia, called T.N. Stoa, and he'd probably been a fellow student of Cole, and as he got out of the car, out there at Uriarra, he came up to Cole and he said, 'Our profound sympathy, Cole', and I learnt something from that.

How did the fire get going in the first place?

There were several starting points but the main one that went through Uriarra started, with hindsight, from a roadside billy fire over on the Wee Jasper/Tumut road which is in the north-west direction from Coree. It had been burning for a couple of days. At the garden party at Government House there were scorched leaves falling down onto the lawn there, so it was really burning very heavily at that stage at, say, three o'clock in the afternoon of January 13.

Fanned by westerlies?

Well, north-westerlies. That's the prime wind direction for bad fires in the ACT, except that if you get a change then as sometimes happens, it will turn to south-west but they were north-westerners bringing it over.

You said it burnt out about three and a half thousand acres at Uriarra.

Three and half thousand acres of plantation, mainly Uriarra. The main age classes were a little bit of '27s, '28s. There weren't much of '29 or '30 or '31 for that matter - yes, that went too and then some substantial areas of 1932 and '33 plantation. It burnt not very much in Pierce's Creek. They were spot fires at Pierce's Creek and the main plantations near the dam, a good deal of that survived,

anyway. I'm a bit hazy about the exact boundary there but it went more or less in a straight line. Yes, it must have burnt some of the '28s at Pierce's Creek.

What proportion of deep plantations did it burn out? -
I mean of the total pine plantation.

I have a recollection it was about a third.

A third! That must have had a major economic impact.

It begins to raise feelings that the whole policy of planting might be in danger and so on and it's a big knock but the first decision you need in those circumstances is one of intent to continue forestry work and that comes up every so often when these really bad fires occur. For some reason, and I don't know, it must have been because there was a substantial planting program intended for '39, there was other planting stock on hand so a great deal of it was replanted in 1939.

Very quickly.

Yes, I think we got a couple of thousand acres in, maybe even a bit more. It was there already to go and the weather turned the right way in the winter of '39 and so

Where did you get the staff from to do all the planting
- this heavy planting program in '39?

We were still Depression times.

There were still relief workers.

Yes, it perhaps was more stable then. There was better funding and it may not have been relief work so much but it was still a fairly big labour program.

You said that the '39 fire burnt out about a third of the total plantation area. That means that there were about 10,000 acres under plantation then. Can you give me an idea of what the increase had been from the time you first started with ACT Forests up until the 1939 big fire?

Yes, I think the nominal planting program was something approaching 1,000 acres a year. Maybe the total area in '39 See, from '32 to '39, seven years, 7,000 acres, that's right. Yes, it may have been a bit less than 10,000 the total. There would be perhaps 7,000 in the Cotter and then Stromlo and Kowen would have made it up to about ten but that should be checked. I must say that I've made some errors with this kind of recollection so when figures are please verify.

Was it exclusively radiata pine that you were planting?

No, but the large majority, the major portion of area, of course, was but there were some ponderosa in the bullock

paddock at Uriarra and probably a little bit of laricio, Corsican pine, but otherwise just a few experimental plots.

The ponderosa and the Sicilian pine, were they successful?

If I could just call it the 'Corsican'. Sicilian is quite correct because it's natural also in Calabria where I've seen it. It is, I would say, a really quite successful species but it's slow growing compared with *pinus radiata*; really much slower, like half the rate of growth. Ponderosa has been a great disappointment for more than one reason and although it was still being planted as a result of what I think is a very good policy to diversify, better not have all your eggs in the one basket and have some differences of genetic background and so on. Ponderosa has shown up as giving poor timber in terms of sawing at relatively young ages of thirty or forty years. It needs to go to more like eighty or a hundred years and also it tends to get a fungal disease, *diplodia*[], rather badly and those two things make it a very considerable disappointment. It's only now that some of the timber is being used and that's been more or less - if I can use the word - being junked; it's not got any good commercial value. It might be different if there were a pulp wood outlet which there isn't yet in the ACT but nobody, I think, now would plant ponderosa pine. For things like poles and high quality - somebody told me recently that Corsican pine peels very well, gives a good veneer; one of those places producing veneer, and I would be inclined to

look at Corsican pine still again. There's some nice stands over near Batlow at Laurel Hill but they tend to be around sixty years old, so in this market driven economy we're in, people don't like to go to that too much; it makes the books look poor. So, however, I believe it's still important to look at diversification and one of the possibilities that's showing up a bit is *Pinus muricata* - I've forgotten what the common name of that is - from northern California, the blue muricata which will stand colder conditions and higher levels than radiata pine and also endure more snow and also is relatively resistant to the fungal disease, dothudroma[?], so that's the one that I would like to see tried now a bit more. There are a couple of nice plots out at Reid's Pinch on the Brindabella Road which suggests that it could be used.

Who planted those?

That was part of the research program from F.R.I., Forest Research Institute.

How long ago did that take place?

Around thirty years old. There are localities. Muricata comes in two forms and it was panned earlier because the green form has many defects, more like ponderosa, but the blue form from northern California, places like Fort Bragg and so on near the Oregon boundary, are a different kettle of fish.

So these small plots have been growing quite successfully for about thirty years.

Yes.

Haven't been milled at all, I suppose, or anything like that.

No, there may have been a little bit of cutting but not these at Reid's Pinch. They're nicely grown but they do show the difference between having the improvement work that's gone into *Pinus radiata* missing, so that the average quality of the stems is not as good as radiata but there are some which are as good. It grows nearly as fast. I wouldn't say it grows as fast but it's comparable anyway.

How much radiata was being cut at the time you first joined ACT Forests? It wasn't known as that then but at the time you first became involved in ACT forestry and then up until, say, the beginning of World War II.

It increased, of course, during the war years. It must have been a very small quantity and I can't remember exactly the figure. I have a feeling that it might have been 5,000 cubic feet a year, something like that. That in terms of cubic metres would be - divide by fourteen - that's about three to four hundred cubic metres. That seems too little, but it wasn't much because it was coming only from Stromlo at that stage.

What was it being used for?

It was going into the housing in Canberra.

Only in Canberra though?

Yes. It must have been more than that but nevertheless it wasn't very large.

Only from Stromlo.

Well, initially, and then there was a bit from Kowen later and then still later, of course, Uriarra and Pierce's Creek. When I started in '36 it was only Stromlo.

What about the hard woods? What were they being used for?

The same thing: housing in Canberra, because *Eucalyptus delicatensis* which was the main species, Alpine Ash, produces a very nice timber. Mountain Ash, that may be regnans[?] but it's that quality; you can see the gum veins in it.

The hard wood milling stopped about 1937, I think. Why did it close down?

No, it surely ran later than that.

Yes, okay, go on.

Because it was in Bushrangers Creek and Ray Margules was supervising some of the logging there; I mean at the overall control level, after I'd left. There's a little bit I'm vague on here. No, I think it went on much later than that, but Lees Creek finished about '37.

That must be what I'm thinking of, yes.

Then there was the next valley, Bushrangers Creek. The logs were being - they weren't milled out there. The mill ceased, that's right, and it was right on the stream. The logging from Bushrangers Creek continued through the war years and I think into the '40s. I think it continued into late '40s, nearly into the '50s, and then it stopped. Well then, there was a major change if we were go on to [inaudible] and the research diminishing anyway.

Is that why the Lees Creek operation was shut down, because the timber was being cut out or had been cut out.

Yes, I think so and then it was a very ramshackle mill and it was deemed better to bring the logs into a central mill which was established at Kingston beside the softwood mill and then with that change of arrangements the original mill, there was no point in keeping that going, it just couldn't cope with what was wanted. I think there was a big stimulus

to production during the war and the years immediately after '45-6.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

Identification: this is tape 2 of an interview with Professor Lindsay Pryor, conducted by Brendan O'Keefe, recorded on 2 August 1994 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.

We were talking about the period just before World War II and at the outbreak of the war or soon after the outbreak the then head of ACT Forests, Cyril Cole, joined the 2nd AIF and departed for Scotland and you became head of ACT or Forests and Forestry in the ACT.

It was called Forestry Section of the Property and Survey Branch of the Department of the Interior and I was Acting Forester.

You were fairly young when you took over. This must have been some honour for a you.

Yes, I would have been twenty-four. I was born in 1915. Does that add up? Have I got the right dates? Yes.

It must have been quite a leap forward for you and a career jump and all that sort of thing.

Yes. It was indeed, of course, a major change and going back thinking about life, there have been two or three like that and this was, of course, the first one because it was Yes, it was moving rather quickly to a position which would have taken a good many more years if things had just gone along normally.

I suppose inevitably with your elevation to the position your duties would have expanded and the number of hours you put into the job gone up as well.

I don't think I'm being too immodest when I say that once, when the Public Service Inspector was asking about jobs, I said I work about fifty to sixty hours a week. Of course, I did take the fire business very seriously and so a great cricketing career was cut short because I had to remain on tap at a telephone at home or somewhere on the weekends because it was necessary to keep in touch with what was going on in the fire business. Communication was much less efficient than it was later so that was demanding and, of course, that hadn't been my job really previously. I was not Chief Fire Control Officer and then with depleted numbers of people and so on that became quite demanding.

Were you still living in Griffith at this juncture?

Yes, I stayed there right through; 32 La Perouse Street. And I could look out to the east at the hills behind Queanbeyan, Bungendore Hill, and on one occasion when the diesel train was starting fires when the funnel became level with the cutting, we got into the groove after a while and knew that every time the damn train went out, there was going to be a fire and where I was in La Perouse Street I could look across to the hills and see it start. We did have people out there after a while.

Was this a very common event?

No, we had a terrible battle with the New South Wales Railways who refused to believe or to admit that their trains were starting the fires. On one occasion, as things had progressed, they had a couple of railway officers from Sydney following the train on a trolley and when we got there they were busily trying to beat out the fire with their hats or something.

Did the trains start any major fires in Canberra?

No, it was all there on those cuttings as you go over the scarp to Bungendore and they were roughly in the same place and fortunately there wasn't an outbreak on a very bad day and after a while there was so much burning and the obvious places were mostly burnt over anyway so, no, it didn't lead to any disaster, but it could have.

With the outbreak of the war and your taking over the Forestry Section, what was the immediate effect of the war on forestry in the ACT or was there any particular effect straight off?

Yes, in particular I suppose the most significant one was the placing of free aliens, as they were called, in work and this request came through from, I think it was called the Manpower Organisation - I've forgotten the exact title - but they were concerned with allocating people for various jobs and one of the groups they had was the so-called 'free aliens' who were mainly Italian but a few other nationalities like Austrian and here and there a German who for one reason or another were not considered security risks and were allowed the restriction imposed by being directed to do particular work. So they were doing forestry work in the ACT. We set up two camps, one at Blue Range and one at Pierce's Creek, called Laurel Camp, just up the road a bit.

What period were they set up in - I mean, what year?

It must have been in the early '40s. They were a good time; it took a while to get going so I expect it was about '41. This is where I'm I can't be sure of the date. But they continued after the end of the war for a while. They leave to go - they nearly all came from Sydney - and so they were given leave and I suppose a rail ticket return to Sydney to be able to go home. Many of them were married and they got to their families and then back again. So they'd

leave on Friday and back on Monday morning and resume camp life for a fortnight. Every fortnight they got leave.

How did they take to the work?

Pretty well, I think, really. There were one or two things, I suppose, that were relevant. I took that business seriously and felt that I had an obligation to make sure that it went well if I possibly could, so I spent a lot of time with them, especially when they first arrived - the first six months. I visited the camps very frequently and I got to know them all by name and by sight. There were two interesting aspects. The camps were different in the content and the way they developed; there were certain subtleties. The one at Blue Range was more Italian than the other, but I remember there was one man called Paulo Senino[?] with whom I had some long conversations because he was, I would say, a broad-minded person, well educated, and he was anxious to always or liked to discuss the merits and demerits of the history and the possibilities for the future, so we had a lot of talks. And there were some others in the camp there like that at that particular camp. The other one at Laurel Camp at Pierce's Creek there were more German speaking people, not many but more, and one of them had an interest in language and I was studying German at that stage. I'd enrolled in night lectures at the University College because I regarded that for botanical forestry work as a language that one should acquire if possible. I'm no linguist but I did keep going. There was

a man there called Gunther Schintler who was - Schintler perhaps, what is the ark?

Schindler's Ark.

It may have been the same name; very close anyway, who was very good at language and he was up on both the grammar and vocabulary and literature; so he used to prepare some notes for me to improve my understanding of German literature and language, and so we developed a kind of exchange where after I'd done the necessary business, I would sit down for half an hour with him and have a go at my new lesson and take it away and read it. That established a kind of They're the two aspects I remember. There were others. There weren't exclusively those people but I got to know them well because of that sort of thing - with those two little anecdotes illustrating the kind of contact. There were others that I don't remember as well, of course, because they weren't quite so prominently impressed in my mind. They worked pretty well and we required them to do a fair day's work without pushing them too hard because many of them hadn't come from a manual work and so on but we got enough. And, of course, there were funds provided to be spent on their wages and so on; so we expected to get some reasonable return for the money spent, and we did.

How much were they paid?

That I can't remember. It was adequate, I would say, but it wasn't a bonanza but I think it was the basic wage, but that would need to be verified. Whether there were allowances for family or what, I'm not sure, but it wasn't too bad. It was probably a bit down but it wasn't a bad The idea was it wouldn't be a way of taking an unfair advantage of the ordinary workforce by undercutting the standard basic wage, so that's roughly the setting but what the actual figures were I don't recall now.

Did you encounter any resentment amongst any of them at all at their situation?

No, not really. They were stressed by being separated from their families, but that didn't express itself as resentment of our part in having to supervise the camp. It was pretty free and easy going. They arranged their own mess and bought their own supplies and a cook was provided so that they had pretty comfortable messes, really. There were no barbed wire, of course, and they were able to move. There was no supervision of them going to Sydney and back. They honoured that. We very, very seldom had any default in return and there was never any worry about that. Now and then one of them would get sick and we'd have to take them into a doctor or dentist. I remember doing that myself on a number of occasions. We used to pay them in cash so that I had to go out with one of the local policemen, Len Powley mostly, to take the cash out with somebody from the Paymaster's Section, so they were handed out cash in an

envelope on the spot and that was another thing that was done.

How many of them were there approximately?

About thirty in each camp, I would say.

That's not a great number. I thought there might have been more.

No, there may have been a bit larger at some stage but about thirty.

You mentioned that many of them hadn't had any background in manual work. How then were they chosen for this?

I think they had to be well enough, of course, and not too old and so on but they were doing things like in shops. One of them, I remember, an Austrian-Italian called Frakheysen[?] who later became a head waiter at one of the swank restaurants in Sydney like Pruniers or something of that kind - I saw him once afterwards. I saw several of them in Sydney at different occasions. Schintler was in some kind of business with a business partner. They were that sort of thing. There were the Maggiotto brothers who were Italian who were fruiterers. Again, I can't give a precise run down but they weren't doing navyying work so

that to use the hands with tools, it takes awhile - a week or two - to run in.

What sort of work were they involved in?

The regular seasonal work so that in the dry season it would be pruning pines, the winter would be planting, and those were to be the two main manual operations. I remember some excitement when we did our burn from heaped material from the original clearing for planting at Blue Range and a certain amount of anxiety about whether we might lose one or two of them but that was all right. I remember we put in a road there, a track, which became known amongst all of them as the Burma Road.

I like their sense of humour.

Who was the great Russian general at one stage; I thought I would remember this forever? He was called Tesoriero so he became known locally in the camp as Timoshenko.

These camps operated throughout the war.

Yes, and I believe - I, of course, ceased to be concerned with them in about 1944 when for a short time I was both Superintendent of Parks and Gardens and Acting Forester, pending Cyril Cole's return which I think was in '45. I lost touch then with the camps but I know they continued in some form for perhaps a year longer. I think they may not

have closed completely until even '47; that's a matter of record but I just don't recall.

What I'm interested in though is even though the camps operated for a relatively long period were the same men there for all that period or did they stay for a year and then ...?

The first batch was there for pretty well most of the time. I think it began to be some cyclic changes after about '44 or '45, after Armistice I think there were changes, but most of them were there most of the time up till then.

Did these men constitute the major part of the Forestry Section's workforce in this war period?

Very much so, very much so, and that allowed the planting to keep going through the war years and keeping up the program of x acres a year, so the plantations were substantial. The areas established during those years were quite substantial.

Was there, because of the demand for timber during the war period, an increase in the areas planted or the area planted?

There'd been some decision, I think not at a very elaborate planning meeting, that the planting program ought to be whatever the figure was, let's say, 800 acres a year. That was the target. It was funded on that basis and so the work

kept going. It was argued that there needed to be a fairly substantial area to support industry of significant standard and size when it came into full production so that was generating the continued planting, really, to get up to whatever the figure is now - sixteen or seventeen thousand acres.

Was there increased cutting?

Cutting was being pushed along to the maximum that the forests could allow.

Because of the war demands.

Yes, war demand, because I think ACT got by with its own No, they must have imported some still. Any production that could come from the ACT was a significant plus for supplies of timber during the war and then with the expansion after the war of housing and so on, I think then it became highly significant, too. I can't really speak about that in the way that I think you ought to be able to get if you cast the net a little more widely but that basically was the situation.

So the Forestry Section had about nine to ten thousand acres under plantation at the start of the war and then planting at the rate of about 800 acres a year roughly.

I think those were the figures. A figure I remember fairly recently was, at the last review, around 16,000 acres as the plantation area. Of course, some of that would have been replanted by then - quite a bit of it. There's about a forty year rotation, so that the 1932-35 plantation would have been replanted in what's that? - '79. So present day, you've got to be careful and adjust that. I'm sorry, I can't be more precise about those figures.

No, it's quite a while back, so I'm not concerned. We can always check the files.

I just don't recall them exactly now and I could easily be making a mistake there but I'll think about this after we've finished.

Were you affected by war stringencies?

Yes, frankly I had a certain amount of emotional problems, of course, because I was what was called reserved occupation which has got its downs from one point of view. I and people like me took the VDC seriously, Volunteer Defence Corps, so we used to turn out at least once a week and sometimes in the evenings and once on the weekend during those years from '41 onwards. We went through really a very good training exercise because we had Duntroon, of course, being detailed to give us all that. I've spoken to one or two people who were much later and asked which they preferred: the Bren gun or - what's the other one called?

The Vickers.

Yes, and also the Tommy gun, I've forgotten the name of that now - and mortars and so on.

Owen gun.

Owen gun, that's right. We went through the jazz on the ordinary Lewis gun, too, with fault numbers one, two and three or whatever they were and so forth, and live ammo. There was nothing to pussyfoot about it. So that was all unexpected experience and not without some benefits in spite of the downside of that sort of thing.

What was it like living in Canberra during the war years?

Things I suppose were pretty stringent if you looked back. I know I had a couple of four gallon cans of petrol and an old Chev car that pretty well fell to pieces in the weather because the motorbike shed was all I had to put it in. So transport was restricted, food was rationed. That sounds hard but in terms of survival and good living, it wasn't all that bad at all, and it carried over, of course, in my experience to visiting I went to UK in 1947 and there was still rationing there, so that certain things like butter and meat and so on were in - you just couldn't go down and buy what you felt like buying but you could get enough to comfortably get by.

Did you have a family by this stage?

Yes, they were all young; born in '42, '44 and so on, or '39 and those other dates. But they were largely pre-school.

During the period after you became head of the Forestry Section, what were your major tasks in that period during these war years? What would you describe them as?

It was managing the forestry estate which involved the established areas through the labour force we'd acquired then, according to what was regarded as the standard prescription of pruning and thinning and planting and protection, fire control - without an assistant because I was the assistant who was left behind - doing all of that myself. I regarded that as an obligation in the code in that situation. I remember, since this is not going to be published, during that occasion I had to get the little hand sowing machine for seed to Uriarra and there just wasn't any way of doing it, so I put it on my shoulder and on the bicycle and got it out that way. I had to stop a few times.

How much did it weigh?

It wasn't all that heavy but it was like a good pack. It was a little Planner Junior - two handles and little container for the seed and just a couple of small tines to open up the trench and a front wheel. You could do it.

Were there any major policy changes in the period?

No, very much not. It was a matter of hold things as they were and try and prevent disability and loss and so forth, and we were lucky not to have any more fires and the fire protection system had greatly improved so that the combination of things, improvement and lack of a critical year again, meant that we came through that pretty well unscathed.

You were the lone qualified forester during this period.

Yes.

How did the fire warning system improve?

Even though it was war years we got the lookout towers functioning. We got one at Stromlo and we had a bit of a tussle with the authorities because on the radio we were broadcasting some of the weather, such as wind direction and so on. What the heck they thought that would do to undermine the security of the country, I don't know, especially as it only had about a twenty mile range. Yes, we got that sited at central station at Stromlo and then we had these subsidiary portables which had to be operated to some extent from fixed aerials as you got out a bit. We had one set that could go on a pack horse so that we reckoned we could keep illegal fire burning or uncontrolled fire burning

on the western side of the Brindabella Range in control if we made a show of appearing there, so I did a fair bit of - with Jack and Doug Maxwell - packhorse work; perhaps two or three times a year to go in there, meet the people there, talk about what our aims were and at least give them the idea that it wasn't out of sight, out of mind, if they started doing some burning when they shouldn't. That worked pretty well.

Did you have some officers engaged in this work full-time in the summer months or was it always a part-time thing, carried out in combination with other forest duties?

Very much the latter. There were no bodies specifically set aside for fire control work. That just had to be taken as part of the job, taken in your stride. We had, for example, on the radio, central station at Stromlo, a couple of women over the different years who were doing that part. No, the rest was very much ... well, it had always been part of the forester's activity and the Forestry Section so that was just taken as a matter of course.

The whole period that you worked in Forests, apart from the '39 fire, were there any other major fires or indeed other catastrophes that affected the ...?

There weren't any catastrophes. There were some fairly serious fires in which we had to get a number of men out but

fortunately the war years themselves were, in spite of the dry year of 1942 which was very dry, we didn't have any really major blow-up fires and we didn't lose any plantation. It wasn't until '53 that there was a significant fire which burnt Stromlo. Oh yes, I think one must acknowledge there was a bit of luck in this but that's the way it went. It depends who you're speaking to.

Luck and good management. During this period, since it was basically a period of keeping things going, I assume that there was very little in the way of experimentation going on.

It's funny, you can always get a little bit of trialling in. In forestry that's almost part of the system and if you want something laid out elaborately with the opportunity for correct statistical analysis, well, that's another matter but I got a number of little trials in of one kind and another. I remember on Green Hill

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

I remember on Green Hills planting which was done about these years; that's the area on the right bank of the Molonglo just by Scrivener Dam, running from Stromlo back to the Cork Oak plantation. There was a new ... planting in grassland hadn't been done much because most of the planting

was done on eucalypt forest which had been cleared for the purpose, but that was a different thing and there were some conditions there that were different and so I did some simple trials and experiments to see which was the best way to go there. They provided information. Also, of course, we had trials with cuttings that really was foreshadowing the work that is now associated with clonal planting of *Pinus radiata*. Some of that work of Max Jacobs and then Jack Fielding in the '30s and early '40s was provided with field facilities for putting those trials out which were really very significant trials in Blue Range and in the 1940 plantation on Stromlo on the deviation of the Cotter Road at the Coppins Crossing turn-off, and some of those first clonal plantings on which later experiment and development was based to lead to the situation now, which is pretty highly advanced, in the use of cuttings as the planting stock was underway, so we kept that going very effectively, really.

That's quite good, I'm surprised about that.

In many ways, if you had a planting program going, it only meant just having enough energy to get up and do the extra in ensuring that the stuff went in where you wanted it to and it was recorded. But Andy Wood who remained with the Forest Research Institute was really the one who put a lot of the recording work into that. He was available through the war years and he was very good at it.

What about the rabbit menace when you first came into forests and during your period, had it been largely controlled or eradicated?

It was done the hard way. I had gone up to fairly large blocks, like 5,000 acres, all netted and extermination inside the netted area with usual methods of getting at the burrows, ripping up the burrows and cyano gas into the burrows and then maintaining the fence by regular patrol by a ranger and repairing any gaps. And then if any rabbits did get in, getting rid of them. The cost of a netting fence was pretty high. The cost of regular patrols was significant, anyway. One man would look after 5,000 acres, so there might have been three or four rabbit rangers. But that had to be kept going. This was well before myxomatosis.

And this was all through the Depression period and into the war years.

Yes, and that had been started by the arrival of J.C. Breckenrigg[?] in Canberra in about - I think it was in about 19... during the First World War, I think. He came in as an expert in rabbit control and extermination and became Lands Officer. He controlled both the lands and forestry. He was in charge of that so I knew him pretty well. That's how that came about. He introduced the methods that had been developed up somewhere - Condobolin, Narrabri, somewhere in that part of New South Wales.

How successful would you rate these methods during the years that you were in ACT forests?

Very good indeed, costly but excellent. If you did the job properly, you got rid of the rabbits. And in fact if we hadn't done it, we wouldn't have plantations; and the stocking in the plantations was quite good, so the answer was, yes, very successful but, of course, with the trend in costs of labour and so on it became out of step as time went on.

On the same subject of potential disasters or nuisances, high winds have also affected ACT forests at some times.

Yes, there were, and we had, of course, plantations that were old enough to be susceptible to that sort of damage. There was a notable occasion in Stromlo, I think it must have been in the '40s in which a few acres were blown down flat on the main east facing slope of Stromlo near the top. I looked at that with some considerable interest because it was the first time that there'd been something like that available to look at, and I was able to prepare a paper on what seemed to be some of the significant things to minimise and reduce the chance of that sort of damage as a result of what I could see there. Then there were later ... but that was during the war years. That was never published, actually - it was too long. That's my version.

Tell us briefly what were the conclusions that came out in your recommendations?

The popular misconception was, expressed in the words 'the wind had got into the plantation' and that 'the trees were blown down like dominoes', that 'the one upwind went first and knocked over the downwind leese side ones'. But a bit of an examination of the stuff on the ground and looking at the way the branches were pulled back by the trees that would have been in touch with them, that was quite wrong. There generally needed to be a starting area, that is trees blown over and that would usually be associated with some extra wet spot or some, perhaps, excessive thinning or something of that kind that gave a bit of a hole in the plantation, and then the trees fell into it because their support on the leese side had been removed and it wasn't the domino effect, it was the hole into which the trees fell and that hole progressively opened up to the windward and not to the leeward. The idea was that the domino went downwind and kept extending to the lee but it did not, it extended to the upwind side. Now, when you make an assessment of a situation and conventional wisdom is one thing, it takes awhile to come round to the thinking that is the result of the evidence on the ground, so I found that a bit fascinating.

How would you overcome the problem?

You must be careful not to delay thinning or, if it is delayed, you must be careful then not to thin too heavily. So it's a matter of stand manipulation. Once you know of the risk The current wisdom is that you must be very careful of the radiata pine plantation after the eighteenth year and if you have delayed thinning then you must go cautiously. If you open up too heavily, then you get a bit of wind you're likely to run into trouble. Everybody knows that now, of course.

What about accidents to humans in the forests? Did you have any ...?

By and large our record was very good, I think. There was one that I found distressing. The clearing for planting was done by little contracts and the contractors who were doing, usually just two or three men, did the felling with an axe and hard work. On the Blue Range area which had plantations in the '40, '41, '42, perhaps '43, I think it would be in the plantation coming up for '42, so it was the '41 clearing, a man called Hamilton, Cletus Hamilton, who was the son of the road maintenance man at Uriarra, Roley Hamilton, the family was partly Chinese, he was one of the two contractors working on the Blue Range in this area. Jim Bradley who was the foreman out there told me what happened - because he was killed there. He was working too close to his neighbour and he got a call when the tree was going in his direction and he looked up and it hit him fair in the face and killed him on the spot.

Terrible.

Terrible, unnecessary, too, that's the thing. The free aliens and Paulo Senino[?] in particular, I remember, were there knowing that this had occurred; whether they were there when it did, I'm not quite sure, although I think they were. Then they wanted to follow, and I think did, the Italian custom of putting a little cairn with a cross on it. I think that was done at their initiative. It wasn't an Australian custom to do that. So that was one thing I remember particularly. I think that was the only thing I can recall as a fatality, and I don't remember any really significant injuries occurring during the time. There were minor ones, of course, for various reasons. Once you get numbers of people like that getting into the fifties, sixties, you more or less get them. It's reduced with time, I fancy. But I don't think we were regarded as a high risk place.

You mentioned there that you were using contractors for, I think, thinning and some planting, too. Was this before World War II?

Both before and during. The logging at Stromlo, following, I guess, the pattern of South Australia, up there at Wirrabara, with Cyril Cole, had been to let small contracts and that carried on through the war. The small contracts at Stromlo during my time, which continued into the war years, that was one of the jobs I had to do in the war years was to

advertise, select and let contracts and supervise them. They were tiny contracts; two or three people. There were just a few names. The best contractors were of Italian origin so that Tranquilo Corsini, for example, was one and he employed Vic Res[?], who's still about I think. There were one or two others and then also Glen Cavanagh was running a little sawmill at Kingston, he did some. Bill Ginn did some. Cavanough was also bringing in logs from Lees Creek and probably continued later until that group of log carters whose name I can't recall for the moment - it was well known; I do know it but I can't recall it for the moment

Not the Rosin Brothers?

No, it was well before then. But they're still about. Their name is still about on trucks. These contracts were The Stromlo ones were very interesting because they were very personal. The forester marked the trees; you didn't leave that to any sub-professional. I used to dream in bed of a remote controlled buggy, like a moon buggy, which would go in and you would give it instructions and there would be a visual transmission and you'd mark them that way - very vivid. It became reality you see. Anyway, these contracts were let and particularly Corsini and Res, they were really muscle men but very good - lifting heavy logs, not very big logs but they were heavy for one man - and they worked out a beautiful system for doing it to avoid

injury and so on and to handle logs; balancing them and so on. They'd snig with a horse then frequently.

Just one horse to pull logs in with?

They had just two or three logs together and they just had a bit of a shoe and pulled them, usually - a bit downslope - and then loaded them onto the truck with this, often hand loading. I think it probably won't be unfair to mention one thing. There was unease with the AWU and the union organiser about letting contracts and particularly when it seemed that what they regarded as non-Australian; of course, they were citizens and this was, of course ... I didn't share the view that anybody who was a citizen could not be an Australian, so I had to be on the other side of the fence. Because it seemed, because of the historical sequence led to a preponderance of people of Italian origin being the contractors, Bert Gardner who was the AWU organiser waited on me more than once. I remember one somewhat heated interview in which he said, 'You're awarding contracts to black men'. I was a bit naive and I think with hindsight he meant men who had been declared black by the union. I took it at the time as being racist and that rather ran counter to what I believed, and so I said we were awarding it to people who were the lowest, good, sensible tenderers. And I said, 'Are you saying that Vic Res and Tranquilo Corsini are black men?'. And Res, of course, was of Austrian-Italian origin - the most beautiful blue eyes you could imagine. I was a bit at fault then because Bert,

I don't think, meant what I interpreted it to be, but it raised my hackles as being in the days when it wasn't too fashionable to be anti-racist. I'm no paragon of virtue, let me just say, but this was in the system and it was just one of those things. I learnt, too, of course. But they were good contractors and very good workers and they abided by their contract and they gave their prices and they kept to what they had to do. So that was the basis of the logging operation in 1939 which had been going from 1935 - or before 1935 to '39 - and into the '40s.

Were the contractors only taking thinnings from the forests?

Yes, there was no clear felling. No, we didn't get to clear felling up till 1946 to my time. I don't think the first clear felling would have been done until forty to fifty years on top of 1917 planting or '15 planting. So let's say forty-five plus fifteen is 1960, isn't it? You see, that was much later. It's only now that the second clear felling is coming of age and the plantation age has probably declined a bit, but there were many light thinnings. Every two or three years we'd do another thinning in the old plantations and ease it out, just as was done at Wirrabara and Bundalee.

That's very important, though, this South Australian connection; the precedents that were set there.

And there was just this little bit, only 500 acres or so, this older plantation that Weston had planted between 1915 and 1925 - 500 acres. It was a classical forester/grower/sawmiller relationship. Fronting up to Charlie Francis down at the sawmill was one of the trials for a young forester. He was in danger of having a stroke or apoplexy so that when he would start off by saying, 'I want better logs; they're no good, rubbish!' And of course we hadn't got better logs anywhere. We weren't going to give him only the cream and the leave the rest because we had better logs but not that we wanted to sell. As his face would change from bright scarlet to pale purple I decided I better ease up a bit and be more soothing in tone. Then after that, of course, it was Les Willis and that was an easier situation. I think we had more timber then, too.

Just getting back to the contractors for a moment and particularly the union's objections to them. I assume that the main objection of Gardner was that he would have been claiming that they were effectively undercutting what union labour would have been getting for the same job.

Yes, probably that and also that There would be two elements: that; and also people of Australian ethnic origin were being excluded, and that the contractors were putting in prices that were too low to provide a reasonable income for people doing that sort of work. Yes, he certainly would have been wanting to oppose contract system and ways of

doing work that way, but not to the extent of taking industrial action to stop it. My relationship, I think, was one of respect for each other and I didn't regard myself as on bad terms with him. He came in to see me in the forestry office which was at Acton, now under the lake, I think, whenever he wanted to. He used to do that every three or four weeks. I rather liked Bert Gardner, as a matter of fact.

It raises the other question of why the Forestry Section went in the way of letting contracts instead of going the way of using union labour. Was this another South Australian inspired move?

In the vernacular, you bet - I think. And, of course, it was the kind of thing that if you do logging by day labour there are so many little intricacies of coordinating things and so on that it's very difficult to organise that on a day labour basis. Some things you want to do by day labour with employees but not that kind of operation and, of course, now this has become very much the accepted way of going.

So it was a matter of keeping things simple, let the contactors do it and keep doing it.

They were small contracts; they were very small contracts but during the early war years like '41 and '42, I was then dealing with a man from Queanbeyan, the family is still about, called Vic Saccagio but he was called 'Vic Saccacio'

always and he accepted that as the way his name would be pronounced. Vic Saccacio was running a little sawmill somewhere - Queanbeyan, I suppose, was it or would it be Kingston, perhaps? He was cutting case timber. He was buying timber. Was he logging? I'm not quite sure. He may have had some contractors, too, later. But it was the price that he would pay for the wood - the royalty, as it was called - and the market was there, the demand was keen and I reckon that the timber was worth more than three and sixpence a hundred super feet that was being paid, and in two or three successive contracts for purchase with Vic, we agreed to up the price and we got it up to five and six or six shillings a hundred super. And blow me down, when 'Coley'* came back and got into the saddle again in 1946 he reduced it to where it was. I was flabbergasted. But prices are somewhere near the mark - I'm not quite sure.

How did the Italians get into the forestry work and the contract work - Tranquilo Corsini and so on?

I suspect because they'd had some exposure to it before they came here. I don't know that for sure. They were both from the part of Italian which had been Austrian before the first world war, called Treviso, north of Trieste, north of Venice. I think Treviso is the province, T-R-E-V-I-S-O. There is forest in that area so I suspect that they'd had at least some exposure to that kind of activity there. And it was the kind of thing - manual work - that they seemed to

* C.R. Cole

look out for. They would also do, some of them, felling contractors, clearing and that sort of thing. Firewood was the common one that they went for. It was the kind of activity that suited It must have gone back to some experience. I didn't explore that ever, I should have but I didn't.

Was Corsini the first to get into the contracting area?

There were others. When I started in '36 he was in it but there may have been others. There was a bloke called Joe Potsolo[?] who, I think, was employed by Corsini - another name I remember. Those three, Corsini, Res and Potsolo were three that I remember particularly but there were others, too. I think Saccagio also but he would have been employing people. He must have had some contractors, too. Bill Ginn usually priced himself out. Bill died a year or two ago. He got a job every so often but he tended to be more involved in the carting because he always ran trucks. Every so often Bill would come down to a price which would allow the award of a contract. I knew Bill very well latterly. He could never quite His price would go up and then he'd miss out and then he'd come in again.

When did the system of contracts first start? Do you know that?

I think it must have been before 1934, so I would say as soon as there were logs big enough. It was the setting up

of the sawmill at Kingston, so whatever date that was - at the Controller of Stores area at Kingston - that would have been the starting time of the contracts. That must have been the early '30s, but I haven't got a precise date.

I've interviewed a couple of people. One in particular, an Italian who worked in the '50s, and the Italian influence is extremely strong.

Yes, it still is, as you say, with Nino Rosin at this stage. That family, of course, is well and truly in it, yes.

What would you say was your biggest achievement in the whole time that you spent in ACT Forests, or in the Forestry Section? Or were there so many?

Oh yes, it's very hard to pick (laughs). I always got satisfaction out of doing the job. I suppose I was a bit stick-in-the-mud and single-minded and didn't go beyond my earlier decision to become a forester in time although I did a lot of work that was not conventional forestry - in botanical - which was personal research, really which I continued into Parks and Gardens. Achievements in forestry - I had the satisfaction of keeping the place rolling and I think making progress, like the little financial return which wasn't a very big part of it but keeping that up to where it might have been and keeping things running efficiently. I think labour relationships were always adequate; I would say good, really. I think that depended

on a good deal of personal input because it didn't come about just automatically. So keeping the program going and up to date and within the prescriptions that were seen to be the ones to use was that, and not being burnt again. As I say, there was luck in that.

You were important, though.

END OF INTERVIEW

NOTE: THE INTERVIEW FINISHED AT THIS POINT - THE END OF THE SECOND TAPE - AS PROFESSOR PRYOR HAD TO KEEP ANOTHER APPOINTMENT.