

Boys Camp Noojee

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Forests Commission undertook large unemployment programs of firebreak slashing, silvicultural thinning, weed spraying and rabbit control.

By 1935-36 the Commission employed almost 9000 men for periods of up to eight weeks at a time. The camps generally comprised 25 men with two-thirds being from the city. And despite the blisters, many remained in the country to make their future.

However, there was a particular need to provide opportunities for young people.

Newspapers warned of long-term consequences of enforced idleness of youth of the nation, claiming that if nothing was done “many would become permanently unemployable and would settle down to a life on the dole or turn to crime.”

With the support of two prominent Melbourne businessmen and philanthropists, Herbert Robinson Brooks and George Richard Nicholas (of Aspro fame) and the Chairmen of the Forests Commission Victoria (FCV), Alfred Vernon Galbraith, they established the unique and enterprising “Boys Camp” at Noojee. Local FCV District Forester Herbert Beetham played a key role.

Their stated purpose was to “develop unemployed adolescents under healthy open-air conditions and to build a valuable natural asset... and to be a material indication of the continued growth of a forest conscience on the part of Victorian citizens.”



(Weekly Times 29 December 1934. La Trobe Collection, State Library of Victoria)

The initial funding request of £14000 was refused but the Victorian Premier Sir Stanley Argyle proved influential and £600 was eventually secured for a 3 month trial from the Employment Council, the government body administering relief funds. The program started with 30 “lads” aged between 16 and 19 selected with assistance of organisations like Legacy, Somers Camp, YMCA and the Unemployed Youth Association. The first batch departed by train from Flinders Street on 21 June 1933 but cold weather and winter rain in the wet forests hampered the camps establishment. The local community welcomed the boys with donated books and a radio from the ABC.



Boys camp – Noojee, the 1930s.

The Forests Commission provided a timber hall and other facilities but the boys camped in tents and there was initially no electricity. Commission officers also supervised thinning and ringbarking of young stands of messmate, silvertop and mountain ash together with fire protection works on the 2000 acres of private land purchased by Brooks and Nicholas.

Groups of about 30 were stationed at the camp at any one time and they were paid at rates applicable to Forests Commission workers of 4/1 for boys of 16 years and 10/10 per week for those 21 years old. 9/ per week was deducted for food, accommodation and medical support. And if they didn't work they didn't get paid.



Richard (Dick) Mumford (in apron) was the popular cook at Noojee. He and his wife lost everything later in the 1939 bushfires. Photo supplied by his great grandson, Wayne Mumford. Circa - 1936.

Following the success of the initial trial, further funding was secured and a second camp was established on former sawmill site that had been also destroyed earlier in the 1928 bushfires.

For many, it was their first experience of country life and Boys Camp proved one of the success stories of the 1930s. With two-thirds of the boys finding employment, the program was extended to 15 other districts with 1276 boys passing through the camps by 1936.

But both camps and all their silviculture work was destroyed later on Black Friday 1939. Number one camp was rebuilt during the war years with material scrounged from FCV sites at St Arnaud and by 1941 it was operational again.

Also with the outbreak of the war in September 1939, there was no need for an unemployment program but the camp was used by high school and university students to produce firewood for Melbourne. It is recorded that in 1942, over 200 boys from private Melbourne schools like Wesley College worked on a national service program during their school holidays earning 4/3 per ton of firewood. By 1943 the program had ceased.



Enthusiasm outweighed the inexperience of these boys from Scotch and Melbourne High. During their three week stay at the Noojee camp they cut 1800 tons of firewood to boost war-time fuel supplies for Melbourne.
(The Sun, 22 December 1942. La Trobe Collection, State Library of Victoria)

After the war, the camp was once again occupied as a temporary home for immigrants fleeing Europe, although little information is available for this period of the “Balts” as they were known.

The wet forests eventually took over and all trace of the camps was gone by 1988.

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