

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

I went to Maryborough as District Forest Officer in 1955, in the November, from Macedon Nursery where I had been posted to research duties barely eight weeks earlier. Before that, I had been acting district forester at Ballarat.

The move to Maryborough was the only one of my six district postings which was my own choice. Because my wife and I had just been transferred, and I might have preferred to opt for research work as a career, I was allowed the choice. We had overnight to think about it. The vacancy had cropped up at Maryborough because a district forester in the Otways had resigned, and the one at Maryborough was suddenly transferred to Forrest. The attraction of district work overcame any immediate reluctance to ditch a somewhat hazy prospect of research work. Macedon was a very pleasant place, and very comfortable quarters in the Nursery grounds had character and comfort, but the bait of having the responsibilities of a district was alluring. I realised that I would be the youngest District Forester in the Northern Division by about 25 years.

These notes avoid referring to the forests in the Avoca Sub-District, which means that the Glenmona forest block and the southern Pyrenees do not feature in these recollections. The Overseer and Forest Foreman stationed at Avoca ran the sub-district, with support from the Maryborough office under my supervision. The particular relationship between the Overseer and the Inspector of Forests in Bendigo overpowered the usual relationship between a District Forester and his subordinate in a sub-district. I would find out afterwards, if at all, when the Inspector had called on the Overseer.

These notes are mostly about people rather than vegetation and forest creatures. The relationships of the farmers and the townsfolk to the Maryborough forests were far more complex than in the eastern districts. Apart from anything else, non-locals were scarcely tolerated by many of the citizens of Maryborough, and public servants were outsiders, birds of passage, in the eyes of the majority of the locals.

To illustrate, the local radio station, 3CV, situated at Maryborough, was publicising an amateur theatre production through an interview with its producer, and the broadcaster asked, "Am I right in thinking that all the cast are local people?" "No", was the prompt reply, "Several of them are schoolteachers, bank officers and public servants." Some of them had been residents of Maryborough for more than ten years, yet were still 'birds of passage'.

A friend from Ballarat who was in wholesale groceries told me that national brands and new products were tried out at two places in Australia — free-spending Broken Hill and careful Maryborough, Victoria. Maryborough had known hard times, and one became almost tired of hearing that it was a financially precarious working man's town.

The State Forests

State forest around Maryborough was the remnant of the original woodlands. The total area of Permanent forest (as defined by the Forests Act) was roughly 56,000 acres, and there were many areas of Protected forest (unoccupied Crown land). Out on the Castlemaine road, Reserved forest started at the paling fences of new housing allotments in Maryborough and forest was close to all parts of the boundary of the Borough.

The forest blocks had been mapped early on in some detail, and areas of timber cutting and coppice thinning had been recorded progressively on office copies of these maps. The boundaries of the forest

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blocks were generally a series of straight lines coinciding with the survey lines demarking the private property. The ratio of length of boundary to area of forest was high. Compared with the forest tracts in Gippsland, the ratio was extremely high. External boundaries always bring problems for land managers. Conflicts at the State forest and private land boundaries and surveillance took up a good deal of staff time. The boundaries between private land and the main forest blocks had been fenced but some stretches would no longer keep stock out of the forest. Fallen limbs and overturning forest trees sometimes fell across a fence in winter storms, and the landholder would demand prompt attention. The Crown could take advantage of the Fences Act but was not bound by it, and dealings with landholders could take up too much time. For some of the neighbours an ineffective fence, tardily reported or not reported at all, could be a good excuse for illegal grazing in the forest by his stock.

Forest Management

State law, Government directives through the Minister, Forests Commission policy, the accumulated standing instructions issued by the Commission, and local custom defined the objectives and practices of forest management. There was no current working plan for the District in the form developed in the 1930s, for there had been no revision or new plan since.

The Inspector of Forests could rule on interpretations and administrative decisions so that there was uniformity in the Northern Division of the State. He could and did advise and caution his officers as he saw fit.

A booklet published by the Forest Commission in 1957, "Handbook of Forestry in Victoria", states that basic forest policy had not changed since 1919, namely, "the protection, conservation, and development of the indigenous forests, and the creation and maintenance of an adequate area of softwoods, the aim being to secure to the community the maximum benefits derivable from land reserved for forestry purposes." The booklet went on to list eight points of detailed current policy, which were repeated in a revised booklet of the same name in 1965:-

- 1. To organise management with a view to ultimate attainment of sustained yield and the establishment of a stabilised and permanent timber industry.*
- 2. To provide an adequate forest road system designed to facilitate economical timber extraction, access for fire protection, and general forest management.*
- 3. To develop silvicultural techniques which will ensure natural regeneration of the indigenous forests following utilisation and to improve the productive potential of each site in order to secure maximum output of high quality timber.*
- 4. To further intensify the fire protection organisation to a degree which will ensure maximum safeguards against the worst possible foreseeable conditions of hazard.*
- 5. To secure permanent dedication of all land which in the public interest should be reserved for timber production or other essential purposes.*
- 6. To establish and maintain a sufficient area of coniferous plantations to the anticipated internal softwood timber requirements of industry.*

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7. To achieve maximum utilisation of forest products by encouraging establishment of new industries, particularly in the pulping and hardboard manufacturing field, and development of more efficient processing techniques.

8. To conduct such research as is necessary to achieve the foregoing objectives.

So, the District Forester had to protect these forests from fire and illegal acts, to supply the local people and forest industry with forest produce, to supply the State railways and farmers with construction timbers, and, in some fashion, to conserve the growing stock of these forests, in which trees grow slowly and seldom regenerate from natural seedfall.

This was a time when there was a good deal of latitude for him to make his mark very much in the ways he chose, provided revenue and expenditure records were kept properly, that the auditor's scrutiny of these records produced a favourable report, no section of his local community was making serious complaints, and his peers and seniors had no cause to be over-critical of him.

Supervision from Bendigo and Melbourne

Scrutiny by the Inspector at Bendigo of what I did as district forester was petty in some ways. His visits to Maryborough were rare, and I cannot recollect visiting the Bendigo office for an interview or a staff meeting. Telephone calls from and to Bendigo were few, and few were received from Head Office.

An important topic of conversation raised by the Inspector during his visit to Maryborough to meet me soon after my arrival was the source of firewood for the District Forester's quarters, when they were built. He carefully pointed out the merchant's yard from which he had bought firewood during his own days at Maryborough, many years before. When, eventually, quarters were completed for the District Forester, some months after our arrival, our firewood was either bought or I collected it from the forests on behalf of my wife. Why did I collect forest wood on my wife's behalf? The Forests Act prohibited me from holding a licence, so my wife held a succession of licences issued in the District Office to cover the firewood I brought home. I collected rough dry wood for the open fireplace, a few minutes at a time, and brought it home in the Ford utility. For the kitchen stove I bought yellow gum and box offcuts from the sleeper-mill while that lasted. Well do I remember insisting that the sawmiller accept my cash payment for the offcuts. One did not need much wood of the excellent quality supplied by those forests.

It was obvious that persons with no licence were taking firewood and some stakes, green spars and small poles, for uses such as chook sheds and dog runs, from State forest south of the town at weekends. These timbers could be had under "C" licence cheaply by prior arrangement and payment. The forest supervisors never made weekend patrols, and I chose not to force them into an unpopular activity which would have been more than novel after many years of week-day supervision only.

I polished the green Ford one-ton utility and set out alone on a Sunday morning to patrol the forests, taking the current licence books from the office with me. Within two hours I had interviewed several miscreants. Some of them said they had a licence but not with them. We could not find a carbon copy in the books. They had the option of paying double royalty or unloading their trailer or utility on the spot.

Payment of double royalty was unofficial, and without doubt illegal. I was taught it at Ballarat. Offenders preferred it to a possible appearance before a magistrate, it was all over on the spot, and they could take the produce home. Their alternative was to unload the produce and leave it by the side of the track.

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In the afternoon of the same day, I re-patrolled the same forests and made a further impact on illegal activities.

The clerk was busy for the next two weeks issuing licences for miscellaneous timbers. He cautioned me that it was probably against regulations and reckless in any case to remove licence books from the office, and from respect for him I did not do it again.

Weekend patrols were made from time to time to follow up this initial sweep.

What about the petty scrutiny by the Inspector? Here's a good example; a statement of the daily mileage done by the district utility, with details of petrol put into it and so on, had to be forwarded to the office in Bendigo every month. The Inspector wrote demanding to know why I had used the official vehicle on a Sunday, and more than one, requiring a report of the circumstances. It was a pleasure to comply, and to add that I expected to be left alone to run my district my way or to be transferred. I was shocked, after the common sense attitude to these matters in Gippsland districts. There was, of course, no question of time off or payment for week-end work, so the improved surveillance of the forests cost the taxpayer little.

Fire Protection

The Reserved forest hard against the town boundaries and a few small blocks of unoccupied Crown land situated in the Borough, meant that all of Maryborough was within the Fire Protected Area, for which the Forests Commission had a fire protection responsibility. Without going into detail, it is enough to say that the municipal secretary had been, as Proper Officer (authorised by the Country Fire Authority Act) issuing fire permits to landholders, and it was a task to convince him that he must stop. He thought the Borough was covered by the CFA legislation.

This situation was a mild nightmare to a young officer with a vivid imagination about fire and its possible consequences in a court of law. The district forester was not widely recognised in Maryborough at the time as a public servant of authority. The clerk, who had been in the forest office for 15 years (and who lived at Bet Bet), was not known to officers of the urban fire brigade or by the town's newspaper reporter. I found this out the afternoon he and I were credited with saving the town's coal-gas works, using a rubber hose from a low-down hand-pump from a galvanised iron tank on the Ford utility truck holding at the time about 50 gallons of water, the Commission's only vehicle stationed at Maryborough. The newspaper reported that two unknown men with a water truck had saved the day. No recognition at the scene; no enquiries by the reporter. That was soon remedied, and the chief reporter of the paper became a good ally.

The response time when a fire in the forests was reported was nothing short of alarming to a forester from Gippsland. With virtually no induction into my new position, there had been no warning of what to expect. Here there was no field radio, and when the supervisors and gang were dispersed about their work, response depended on the district forester (if in the office) and the clerk. A standby crew was unheard of. When the district forester was out the clerk had to keep the office open, and could achieve little. So, if a fire was reported at, say, ten in the morning the supervisors learnt about it when they routinely reported to the office at 4.30 or thereabouts in the afternoon. Rural fire brigades could deal with a fire long before forest staff knew about it. Typically, most of the fires had been stopped while small and required no action by the forests staff.

In contrast, the response time when a fire was reported at a week-end was short in my time at Maryborough. This was because I wanted things to go right, and my quarters for most of the first summer

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were two rented rooms, in a house by the railway line owned by a widow. New Commission quarters were being built, all too slowly, and there was no house and only one flat vacant (upstairs in one of the old buildings in the main street) in Maryborough for renting. From our kitchen I could be out to the utility and on my way in a minute of receiving a phone call, while my wife telephoned the overseer, who would wait for me outside his gate. On one occasion a fire report was returned from Head Office by the chief fire officer, with a curt message of disbelief of the recorded response and arrival times for that fire.

The combined Maryborough-Avoca district had no fire tanker. The Ford utility was a one-ton unit, and could carry a corrugated iron water tank, capacity about 100 gallons, fitted with a low-down hand pump, suited for squirting stumps by a roadside or filling knapsack pumps from a rubber hose (or saving the gas works !). Later on we got a Quench Quick petrol centrifugal pump to go with it. In a corner of the depot yard at Avoca there was a 250-gallon trailer tank, a heavy oval steel tank probably obtained from the defence department after the war. The pneumatic tyres were dead flat and the wooden side lockers were rotten. Altogether it was a sad sight, but a challenge to restore. It came up beautifully, with rebuilt lockers, the chassis scraped free of rust and painted fire-brigade red. On the flat country the Ford could tow it well enough. In the event of a large fire I reckoned a hired tractor could tow it to mop up the edge of a fire.

We never used the trailer at a fire for it happened that the Inspector admired it a few weeks later at Avoca and transferred it to Mitiamo, where the forest staff had a tractor but no fire trailer. No discussion about it: the trailer just went, and I did not know until told by the overseer.

I cannot resist relating a snippet about firefighting expenses. A fire had been contained late one afternoon in forest south of Maryborough, and the edge looked fairly safe but the evening was breezy and dry. There were a few spindly red stringybark trees there, and to ensure the fire did not run or throw sparks over the raked line, (and also to convince any local brigade members who were on the lookout that the forest staff meant business), I had two men patrol the fire overnight. The foreman on the fire thought I was being unnecessarily cautious. I put two men on the fire for the night, took them a small box of basic tucker made up at the grocer's, just enough for two men for the night and breakfast. All went well; they worked a little on the edge of the fire and patrolled it. Everyone was content and we got on with managing the forests. Some weeks after the final fire report had been send to Melbourne, there was a terse letter requiring an explanation why overtime had been paid for a fire of such-and-such an acreage at Maryborough, and, further, why money had been spent on food.

The overseer and foreman used their private vans on mileage to travel around the forests. One had a Ford Prefect and the other had a Morris Minor. Imagine my reaction when I asked each of them to carry a knapsack pump and fire rake in the fire season, to be told they had never been asked to do that, and if the knapsack fell over the inside of the van would get wet. Innovation did not come easily.

If another member of staff took the Ford into the forests and I needed transport during the day I had a choice, ride a bicycle to fetch my own car, if my wife did not need it, or simply stay in the office. There was an old bicycle in the shed at the back of the office which cleaned up quite well: handy on my office days to ride home for lunch, the quarters being on the outskirts of the town, on Crown land acquired cheaply by the Department, near the Lands Department depot.

The forest foreman often used his bicycle to patrol and had only his axe to fight a fire. He was amused when I wrapped the head of a fire rake in canvas with two roofing nails, and told him to tie the roll on his bike. If he came across a fire, he could cut a bush a handle and work on the fire. His amusement turned to satisfaction when he did in fact do that one day.

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I have gone into some details of equipment so that the reader may get a good idea of what we had. For the second summer, a fire tanker which had been obtained in Queensland from an Air Force airfield was allocated to the District. It was the best the Commission could provide and in my time at Maryborough was used mainly at rubbish tip fires. The truck was useless on a steepish track.

The Captain of the Urban Brigade had no tanker, and when there was fire at night in the east or the west rubbish tip of the Borough he would telephone for help. He would not sound the general alarm, but brought a couple of his men along to help douse the fire. The main thing to remember was to tie hay-band tightly around one's trouser legs before leaving home, to stop rats running up one or both legs.

Our ready help attracted cooperation from the Brigade, which we called on a couple of times to help with a forest fire close to a sealed road near the Borough.

Conserving the Growing Stock

The box-ironbark forests had been a treasure-trove for the Colony and State of Victoria, yielding naturally durable timbers and a little red stringybark for local use. Poles, piles, spars, beams, sleepers, bed logs, posts, rails, and firewood had been cut for farm sheds, transmission lines, bridges, railway crossings, fencing, and industrial and domestic fuel for a century. Sawlogs for bridge decking and heavy construction timber had been cut. The land cleared for agriculture had provided large volumes of these timbers, and the growing stock of the forests reserved from alienation had suffered heavy inroads.

As I wrote in the Victorian Year Book 1972, *"The virgin forests abundantly served the needs of the early Colony and the developing State. The northern and coastal forests yielded large volumes of strong, durable timbers for bridges, railways, wharves, telephone and electricity systems, and for fencing pastures and crops. Fuel wood and charcoal from the forests satisfied constant domestic and industrial markets. Tradesmen learned to use the unfamiliar woods of the native forests for furniture, boats, and vehicles. The forests yielded tannins and medicinal and industrial leaf oils for local use and export."*

Demands of the State railways, primary producers, local industries and townfolk for timbers and firewood were met as a matter of public policy. The demands on the box-ironbark forests generally for timbers at the time are illustrated in the draft report of the Environment Conservation Council, Box-Ironbark Forests & Woodlands Investigation, issued in May, 2000. Output of railway sleepers peaked in 1960-61, farm fence posts peaked in 1953-54, and firewood production remained very high into the early 1950s.

The first official Working Plans for these forests had been developed in the 1930s, made by an imaginative forester to the best standards of the time. These initial efforts to husband the growing stock had been largely negated during the war (1939-1945) and the demands for timbers during the immediate post-war years were strong.

By the mid-1950s the timber supervisors were marking trees for felling by sleeper cutters and post cutters that would not have been used for sleepers ten years earlier. "Where are the big trees?", I asked the forest overseer the first time he took me through the Havelock Forest Block, which had the choice growing stock of the forest blocks in his charge. The practice of tree-by-tree selection for felling had, over the years, worked down through the size classes, and it was remarkable that the growing stock had not been depleted even more by the mid-1950s.

The tree-markers were not oblivious to this steady depletion of the growing stock, but were under orders to mark trees to satisfy the quotas of the cutters allocated to the forest under their charge. The Victorian

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Railways issued a quota to registered sleeper cutters and the Timber Workers' Union was watchful that its members were able to cut their quotas.

Depletion of the forest growing stock had been accelerated shortly before I went to Maryborough when the Victorian Railways, then reliant solely on hardwood sleepers, had decided to accept yellow gum sleepers, in addition to box and ironbark. The biggest trees south of Maryborough were the yellow gum, and by 1955 many had been felled for sleepers. The cutters liked this because the bigger logs yielded more square sleepers, and yellow gum was easier to saw. The apiarists, many of whom were centred on Maryborough and Avoca, raised their objections to the felling of the large-crowned trees which had served them well.

When a class of students from the Victorian School of Forestry made a day's excursion to the Maryborough forests, I was instantly unpopular with the new Inspector of Forests (formerly a lecturer at the School), who had come from Bendigo to join the tour, when I asserted that the only constraint on timber output in the past thirty years had been the levels of demand.

A recent spot-mill, sawing railway sleepers only, largely from yellow gum, relied on a short-term licence which I terminated as soon as reasonable, having warned the licensee that the forest simply could not keep on providing him with logs. He accepted the situation without argument, acknowledging that the growing stock in the forests he knew well was running down quickly.

There was some pressure on all district foresters to maintain the level of annual revenue. This was not officially stated nor demanded in plain words by senior officers, but the immediate expectation was there. This was tough on district foresters and the supervisory staff who usually had worked for many years in the same forests. The turnover of district foresters was, generally speaking, tough on the growing stock.

The forest staff supervising our timber licensees agreed that an increase in royalty rates for miscellaneous timbers would be a good thing, helping revenue and damping down applications to cut them in our forests.

The royalties on timbers for primary producers and the Railways were demonstrably low. Firewood was a delicate issue: the hospital at Maryborough used firewood, mainly red ironbark, for its furnaces, a factory in the town relied on firewood, and the scores of citizens in Maryborough who cut their own firewood would be sensitive to any increase in royalties.

Sleeper royalties were fixed centrally, but the times were prosperous for farmers and, without consulting higher authority or the cutters, I increased the royalties for fencing and similar timbers substantially. Some post cutters sought timber elsewhere, which was not popular with the district foresters in adjoining districts. The Inspector made no mention of the increases, and in retrospect I cannot see why official wrath did not fall on me like a ton of bricks.

Beekeepers

The leading beekeepers in Maryborough told me it was the beekeeping capital of Victoria. It was a handy central headquarters for their migratory work. Several beekeeping families had been residents for a long time.

Felling of yellow gum for railway sleepers was a huge concern for the apiarists, for the large-crowned gums provided a lot of nectar and pollen. It goes without saying that the apiarists were allies in the wings had my closure of the sleeper mill been resisted.

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I learnt in my earliest days, at Bruthen, that apiarists were watchful licensees, often prepared to pass on useful information about sundry comings and goings in the forests. They were also wary lest other apiarists should beat them to good sites for hives, when word of heavy flowering and a good nectar-flow started to get around.

Apiarists spent quite a lot of time and money travelling to distant forests to assess the budding of eucalypts and the time of flowering. The quarterly budding and flowering reports forwarded from each forest district for collation in Head Office were supposed to be a guide for the industry. At Maryborough the foremen and overseers kept observations in field notebooks as the basis for quarterly summaries. In later years the widow of the senior overseer gave me several of her husband's notebooks, and I lodged them with the historical records branch after I left the Department.

Most apiarists belittled the accuracy and worth of the foresters' reports. They relied on their own observations and forecasts, and, no doubt, on intelligence provided by friendly landowners who might provide the apiarist with a site for his hives, near a dam, in exchange for some honey, often a 4-gallon tin of ironbark, yellow box, or red gum eucalypt honey. The prized honeys come from the slow-growing eucalypts with the densest, naturally durable wood, a combination of utilities certain to lead to conflicting claims on them.

The pattern of land tenure - private property, Permanent forest, Protected forest (unoccupied Crown Land) - caused continual squabbles and friction over sites for hives during blossoming seasons. The Forests Commission issued licences for the first, the Department of Crown Lands and Survey the second, and landholders could invite or allow an apiarist to set out hives for an indefinite time. The Lands Office was in St Arnaud, as distinct from the Inspector's office and depot in Maryborough from which the noxious weeds gang worked. To try to get improved practice through cooperation of the Forests and the Lands officers meant persuading the Lands Officer that it would be in everyone's interests, and then to secure effective communication thereafter. I made little progress here, partly because the idea was novel and partly because relations between the two departments had been uneasy, and sometimes worse, over many years.

So, we had to endure a situation where apiarists competing for effective use of the same area of forest tussled and schemed as best they could for the best sites. The Commission's Temporary Bee Site Licence, with a currency of three months, reckoned on a bee-flight of one mile from the site of the hives. Picture, at worst, the situation where a licensee could have hives in Permanent forest, and a short distance away another apiarist had his hives on Crown land, and, possibly, another had hives in a private paddock a few hundred metres further on.

Some apiarists paid for licences covering several sites throughout the year, effectively blocking their use by competitors. The expense of a succession of quarterly licences bought some peace of mind.

Eucalyptus Oil

There were two eucalyptus oil stills in the forest and one on private property near Talbot which relied on leaf from State forest. The stills worked intermittently. The operators were required to prepare a monthly return of their daily operations, from which royalty was worked out on the quantity of oil produced. Forest staff kept a diary note of the occasions when they saw smoke from the boilers, and these could be checked against the monthly returns. The quantities of oil produced were not audited, but missing entries when smoke had been observed were queried.

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The leaf used was cut by hand from the heads of trees felled for sleepers and posts. The oils produced were high in cineole, prized for pharmaceutical uses. The leaf-hooking and carting and operation of the forest stills was done by older men, as a casual activity. Some of them reckoned they had not caught a cold in years.

Timber Cutting

Three overseers and foremen and a tree-marker supervised timber cutting and other operations in the distinct forest blocks comprising the Maryborough forests. Each overseer had his "charge" (in the sense of care and custody) of two or more forest blocks. So, he really knew the forest and those working in it. It was a matter of courtesy to let each supervisor know when I would be making an inspection or patrolling without him in his charge.

There were many timber cutters living in and around Maryborough, and there was a sawmill on the outskirts, and the spot mill cutting sleepers for the Victorian Railways. The sawmill's allocations of logs in summer came from the Beaufort Forest District, and in winter from the Pyrenees mixed species forest situated in the Avoca Sub-District of Maryborough. The sleeper miller and his sons cut logs in the local forests, and carted them in on a tray truck. The logs were nominally nine feet long (the length of a sleeper), being cut about 10.5 feet to allow for sloping cuts and checking of the ends of the log. Their mill, such as it was, comprised a single rip bench and had not been established for long. It was open to the sky and had no mechanical system for disposing of sawdust, edgings or dockings.

The sleeper, post and firewood cutters held personal licences to cut and remove specified products from the forest. Sleeper cutters and some post cutters worked in pairs, but it was common enough for a cutter to work alone. The Victorian Railways paid royalty for railway sleepers direct to Head Office by means of a journal entry set to allow that quantity to be cut and removed under average working conditions. Full-time and regular part-time cutters worked under "A" licences which were issued upon payment of a deposit enough to cover the expected royalty account for a month. The deposit was recorded separately against the cutter's name and could lie undisturbed for an indefinite time, as successive licences were issued to that cutter.

The supervisors measured what had been cut and recorded the tallies in the "A" licence book when they came into the office at the end of the day. A cutter was expected to settle his account every month, but some latitude was exercised, to recognise carting dates and payment times by customers, to allow for very wet weather which prevented cartage, and other practical reasons. Now, it was a matter for discretion as to pursuit of unpaid royalty when hardship, such as sickness, a broken-down truck (with garage bills to meet before the truck was in service again), or some impediment to sale of produce occurred. Head Office kept a watch on unpaid royalty, and the system produced please-explain notices when accounts became too far overdue. Local knowledge and gossip were critically important in managing the unpaid royalty list prudently.

The essence of successful management of royalty collection was to balance the threat of cancellation of a licence, upon which livelihood depended, against an expectation that the licensee would be treated reasonably, even with compassion, if his cash flow was patchy and he needed time to pay, particularly if his record as a forest licensee was almost unblemished.

The value of timely gossip was illustrated one morning when the supervisors were having their customary few words before setting out for the day, and in the interchange of news one of them mentioned that a certain cutter had changed his butcher; again. Alarm bells! The licensee, a firewood cutter, was overdue

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with his royalty and had recently pleaded for a further short extension of time. I instructed the overseer to keep watch on the cutter from a little distance, and when he had cut and stacked firewood to a market value enough to cover his unpaid royalty to join him as usual and measure the stacks. His instruction was to seize the wood for the Crown if the licensee could not pay off most or nearly all his debt on the spot. The wood was seized and I breathed easier to know that the debt was covered. This episode earned a place in the small anecdotes staff used to tell. I had better say that I cannot remember whether I sold the wood, allocating the money to pay the account, or whether the cutter raised the money himself. In either case, the resolution of the matter was not according to the Forests Act, which provided for a magistrate to issue an order for the disposal of seized produce. The wood was "unseized" by obliterating the broad-arrow (crow's foot) brand made on a few billets by one end of the supervisor's hammer with blows delivering the Crown brand over the first brand. The impropriety of re-branding in this way was not known locally, but the lesson of the episode was not lost on the licensees in the Maryborough forests.

Saw benches were used by some firewood merchants to bench wood into one-foot blocks in the forest. Often fairly large heaps accumulated ready for carting. Particularly on moonlit nights the risk of theft was high. The police might say they kept watch night after night, uneventfully, and then give up, only to learn that the next night thieves had made a good haul. Perhaps the police were not all that diligent.

Departmental Utilisation

It was counter to custom in the Division to engage in "departmental utilisation" of timber. The tenet was that it was unfair for the Forests Commission to take work away from timber cutters. There were some good opportunities for short-term timber operations employing the forest gang, and I managed to arrange some, to vary the work and expand the skills of the gang, and to make money for the Department. The best operation was unusual; pole cutting in the Majorca sugar gum plantation. At the time the Soldier Settlement Commission was developing several new holdings by subdivision in the Mt Mitchell area and further west for ex-servicemen, and a supply of shed poles, to a typically demanding government specification, was needed promptly. There was no local pole contractor and the Soldier Settlement inspector asked what could be done. It happened that sugar gum had grown splendidly in a Forests Commission plantation on the granitic soil at Majorca, and excellent poles could be made from trees felled to thin the stand. I loaded the prices for the prepared poles fully to cover all the on-costs one could think of, and then added a bit more for luck. The SSC inspector was pleased with the prices and the quality of the poles, so everyone, including the youngest member of the gang who went around late in the afternoon applying a thick petroleum jelly to the ends of the day's poles to reduce drying splits, was happy. The men liked the change of work, were interested in preparing produce to specifications, and got satisfaction knowing they generated a profit for the Commission.

Some sugar gum poles were later cut under licence, and we heard they were called Maryborough Box for selling to farmers in the western district. The customers liked their shape and soundness.

The other useful utilisation job was occasional cutting of green firewood for sale as stacked in the forest. A small volume of the usual seven-foot wood could be sold readily for a good price, and the gang could be relied on to fall only those trees the supervisor decreed should be taken. Not all licensees could be trusted to do that, and the departmental work served to demonstrate that there was no need to depend on licensees for all forest operations.

Firewood was commonly cut seven-foot long with axes, in contrast to five-foot lengths in the Ballarat and some other forest districts. When these lengths were sawn into one-foot blocks (for domestic stoves), there

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were more "blocks", namely lengths with both ends sawn than from five-foot wood. Handling and loading the longer wood called for a different lift and upward swing. The long wood was often stacked on its end to dry. There was a common supposition that gravity helped the moisture to run out.

Silvicultural Work

Coppice thinning and track maintenance were carried out by the small District gang. Its members assembled at the depot about 7.30 am and then rode their bicycles to where they were working.

The forest gang was occupied for much of the year knocking unwanted coppice shoots off stumps, using the back of ordinary axes. Thinning at Maryborough was selective as to eucalypt species, longleaf box being bypassed because it was considered to be too inferior to spend money on. Red box had been similarly regarded. There was no useful information about the costs and benefits of coppice thinning. The practice seemed to be an imitation of the silvicultural works of the 1930s, based on a general argument that two or three selected stems around a stump would best accumulate total growth on the stump, and, more importantly, they would grow as straighter spars and poles. Annual Reports of the Forests Commission record the areas of forest in the northern districts treated in this way.

Without this sort of work there would have been no work force for firefighting and other jobs to be done in the forests. Knocking coppice day after day was a humdrum job for the leading hand and his four or five men, but their morale was quite high, considering that and their cycling to and from work. I was glad when a new member of the gang, who lived at Daisy Hill, turned up with a motor cycle and he readily agreed to use it to summon help in the event of an accident or other emergency. For some weeks in the hotter weather when the gang were working further from home than usual, I drove them to work and picked them up. They and the Union organiser liked that, of course, but my motives were to conserve the men's energy for work (particularly attending small fires in Maryborough which were more likely late in the afternoon), and to avoid the problem of unattended bikes if the gang were picked up in the forest and taken to a fire. It would have been necessary to leave one man to guard the bikes, even for an hour or so.

I wanted some reliable measures of work performance, and asked the leading hand to keep a daily record of the area of forest in which coppice had been thinned, and also notes of the species mix and working conditions. His and the gang's suspicions were fairly readily overcome. They had been working with little direct supervision for years, but they decided to trust me not to try to use performance figures against them. It was a useful exercise, and I think beneficial to morale. The leading hand got to a stage when he could forecast pretty nearly the area they would treat in different types of stand in a day.

Growing stock for the future depended on coppice regeneration. Seedlings of eucalypts in the seasons I was at Maryborough were few and far between, and the supervisors related that seedlings seldom survived their first season. I recommended a couple of small planting trials using tubed eucalypt stock, which would have had to be fenced from rabbits and any wandering sheep or cattle, but my proposals for the necessary funds were not approved. My aim was to ensure survival by watering from a tank on the utility, so that the growth and development of seedling stock could be measured.

My article in the Victorian Year Book 1972 had this to say about seedling regeneration, and about wildlife in the woodlands: *"There are very few eucalypt seedlings because good crops of seed are rarely produced by the mature trees, the forest floor is not favourable for germination, and the summer climate is harsh. Nearly all the viable seed shed from the trees is removed by ants and other seed harvesting insects. Small seedlings of red ironbark sometimes develop in a wet summer on fresh ash beds where wood and bark*

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have been burned, or in pockets of loose earth washed into hollows. Few survive the soil-moisture stress and high temperatures and many are grazed by rabbits."

The article also said *"Ironbark-box forests are important refuges for wildlife in a region of Victoria that otherwise has been largely cleared for pastures. Echidnas live throughout these forests, and the most common native mammals are ringtail and brushtail possums, the yellow-footed phascogale, the tuan, and the grey kangaroo. Squirrel gliders occur in forests where grey box predominates. The ironbark-box forests are important sources of nectar and pollen for commercial colonies of bees"*. The ecological complexity of these forests is not a recent discovery. Forest staff, beekeepers and local Field Naturalists had recognised the forests as important wildlife habitats for a long time.

A Budget Manoeuvre

Head Office treated the District funding shabbily one year. The approved budget was tight, every pound was important to pay wages until the end of June. Close to the end of the financial year the finance section withdrew funds from the Maryborough budget, (and no doubt those in other districts), to provide money to support expenditure in another part of the State. This was disastrous - how could the forest gang be employed until new funds became available in July? I appealed, but was told to put off some of the gang and re-hire them in July. What a way to treat loyal employees! Most of the men had a wife and children to feed!

Now, the Commission maintained an account called the Forest Stores Suspense Account which provided relatively large sums to purchase stores to be held under security in the district store until items were required and were debited against a particular job when they were issued out the door of the store. This allowed a stock of many items to be held ready for immediate issue, locally and to a neighbouring district if needed. Not all the items in store had to be new. An item could be returned to store when it was no longer required on a job, and its value was immediately credited to that job account, at a reasoned fraction of the new value of the item.

The clerk and I worked out how much money would be needed to pay all the gang until July, and I returned to the Suspense Store tools and equipment sufficient to build up a credit that would just cover the gap. Some axes were valued at 50 per cent of new value, water bags might be 25 per cent, a crowbar at 75 per cent, and so on. All items had to be under lock and key, the key being held by a nominated officer (the clerk in this instance). Inspectors from Melbourne could turn up at any time to audit the contents of a suspense store.

The manoeuvre succeeded, although shortage of tools meant that the gang spent some hours maintaining the depot late in June. Some months later I was warned most solemnly by a senior officer in Head Office never to even contemplate doing such a thing again. It was not something I did with glee, and I hope that the few other field foresters who got to know about it did not think I was trying to be a smart Alec.

Problems with Neighbours

Many of the private holdings abutting the forest carried little feed for stock, and the success of cereal crops depended on timely rain and whatever fertiliser had been spread by the farmer. It was hungry land, often inherited as a mixed blessing.

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Root competition in a paddock could cause hard feelings. The root systems of boundary trees were extensive, and pasture or a cereal crop near the forest boundary dropped away the nearer it was to the trees. Boundary trees were sometimes ringbarked by the adjacent landowner. This often meant the death of large trees which probably had been left undisturbed because falling them might damage the fence. Unless he was seen doing it, what action could be taken against a landholder or his agent? Sometimes the crown of a flourishing tree would begin to die off, yet there was no sign of axe-marks above the ground. Someone had carefully removed narrow sods at the base of the tree, made axe-cuts or holes with an auger, poured in some arsenic solution, then covered over the signs.

Special instances of tree-killing occurred on Crown land reserves along a watercourse, where the adjacent landholder's stock grazed under licence or lease. Trees could be surreptitiously killed, to promote growth of a little more grass. Of course, the landholder was puzzled: who on earth could have done it?

Mean-minded feuds between neighbours could weave plots into which one party might try to drag the forester. A prime instance occurred when two brothers came into the office to inform against a neighbour allegedly for cutting green saplings in the forest without a licence. There they were, saplings lying by their stumps. One brother farmed his land after a fashion, the other worked for the contractor laying sewer pipes in Maryborough. At interview together they looked hither and yon, and licked their lips a good deal, but strongly backed up each other's accusations. They said they had watched from a vantage point on one brother's land the accused wielding his axe. It was all too good to be true. The victim of the plot seemed a straight and simple man, although he was not a likeable person. He worked as a night watchman in Maryborough and probably had something on one or both brothers. What to do when two citizens say they are prepared to give evidence about the guilt of the near-neighbour of one of them?

I prepared a set of written questions, about 20 of them; what the brothers said they saw, exactly where they were, what colour clothes the victim was wearing, the time of day, the weather, which direction the man walked after felling the saplings, how many vehicles had gone down the road while they were on watch, what colour were they, how close to each other the brothers had stood, crouched or what, what cover they had hidden behind, and so on. Then, having checked that the farmer was home one morning and that his brother was at work on trenches in the town, I went with the senior forest overseer to the farm and put the questions to the landholder.

He was only too pleased to give detailed replies to a diligent forester who was taking action. Then, back to town immediately, (no mobile telephones in those days), to put the same questions to the brother, with permission of his employer. A lot of hesitant answers, lip-licking, vagueness, and "What did me brother say?" The discrepancies in their answers were convincing, and I told them so a few days later. They listened in stony silence and with no thanks to me and my witness-overseer as we left them to it.

There was a sequel. Shortly after five on the next New Year's morning, one brother telephoned to report a fire in the forest. For two hours we searched the vicinity he had indicated, but were unable to find fire or smell smoke, despite careful patrolling. No other report of fire came in. The brother at his farm gate was unable after all to be too sure of the direction of smoke he said he had seen. "Perhaps it was a caravan, a moving smoke from a caravan." This time he looked me in the eye. There was a message in his steady stare.

Down at Daisy Hill lived an old man, alone in a humble cottage. He had the notion that he was entitled to clear the vegetation in the State forest along his boundary, for half a chain (say, 10 metres). He asserted a chief forester had told him years ago that that this was his right, to protect his fence posts from fire and to

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counter root competition. His land created a rectangular bite into the forest, and Henry had toiled hard exercising his fancied right. The forest foreman took me to inspect the scene and to persuade Henry that he must stop. His neighbours down the road reckoned he was an erratic chap, some going so far as to label him a hatter. Soon after the two of us started to walk the boundary, in the forest of course, Henry loped across his paddock to talk to us. After short preliminaries, I explained what we were there for, and a vigorous discussion commenced. Henry emphasised the points he wanted to make by pointing with a .22 rifle he was carrying. He decided he wanted us to go away, and cocked the weapon. I had never believed that moment that the muzzle of a cocked rifle approaches the size of a 12-gauge gun when pointed at one's belly at short range. A couple of distracting remarks from the forest side of the fence changed his mien, enough to lower the rifle. Compromise was the sensible solution. In return for giving up his naughty clearing in the forest, Henry was placated by permission to cut down a few, very few, stems which were very close to the fence, to protect it. Better to have a friend as a neighbour, if you can, than an erratic fellow feeling some hostility towards the guardians of the forest. To an extent, I think Henry became a sort of forest guard himself, even passing on useful information to the forest foreman once or twice.

Victoria Police

The Police stationed at Maryborough did not extend the friendly, cooperative relationship toward the forests staff that I had experienced in small towns. There was no antagonism on their part, merely a sort of indifference. In part this was due to the number of police; there seemed to be tensions between the Sergeant and his men.

On one occasion an old man had wandered off from the outskirts of Maryborough in the late afternoon, and had not been sighted by the next morning. The forest staff found this out by accident soon after seven the following morning when I happened to speak to a constable who was scanning the forest with binoculars from the Bristol Hill lookout. Three of us went from the forest office to the Police Station and offered our help in searching for the chap. It was a frosty morning. We quietly drove into the forest adjacent to where the man had been last seen, and within only three or four minutes we saw him lying on the edge of the forest track. He was unable to get up, and was not fully alert. While the others kept him company and lit a fire of twigs to warm him, I drove to the Police Station with the news. The policeman at the counter told me to put the man on the tray of the Ford utility and take him to the hospital. I told him he could commandeer my vehicle and come with me and be in charge of loading the man on to it, but I was not going to do it. I suggested he use the ambulance, which he did, grumblingly. I waited to guide the ambulance. Within two days the old man died in the hospital. We speculated what attitude his relatives might have taken had I blundered in and carted their dear one to the hospital on the bare tray of a utility. In later years I related the incident as a caution to forestry students.

A few policemen worked on days off to earn extra income, whether or not with permission I do not know. Cutting posts and poles in State forest under licence could be a useful source of earnings. There was a time when some poles and posts or firewood from the heads of the trees had been illegally cut and removed from a relatively quiet part of the forests. Very little enquiry was needed to point to the policeman at a one-man station not far from Avoca as the culprit. When questioned, he admitted what he had done, and demanded to know what I was going to do about it. Over-zealousness would have recommended a prosecution, with all the effect it could have on the policeman's career, and the loss of a potential ally. My decision was coloured heavily by another experience I had had right in Maryborough, which I shall describe next. So, the policeman and I enjoyed a talk about guarding the forests, and so on, and how there were not many of us to do that. Of course, he was content to take out a licence for the poles and posts he had cut,

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and the firewood, too, and would be happy to apply for a licence for any future timber cutting. I like to think that the Commission came out of it with an ally.

A Lesson About Zeal

One very hot day an old chap was driving a spring cart towards the eastern outskirts of Maryborough and the old, fat mare in the shafts dropped dead. The mechanics in the nearby garage of a trucking business came to his aid and towed the carcass behind a truck the few hundred metres to the State forest, right near some houses, leaving a greasy, moist trail along the bitumen. Lying in the forest, the carcass ballooned quickly in the heat, and started to smell, enough for someone to report the nuisance to the Forest Office. Here was a situation only dreamed about! The Forests Act was entirely clear; it was an offence to dump the carcass of any cattle in Reserved forest, and the definition of cattle certainly included the mare. The owner of the dead horse had not reported his predicament, and the samaritans had neglected to report what they had left in the forest in their efforts to fix an immediate problem. And, to provide a nice twist to it, the principal of the trucking business was Mayor of Maryborough at the time. Zeal bubbled to the surface; what a landmark event in getting all and sundry to toe the line. If I let the Mayor and his agents get away with it, how would that reflect on the impartiality of the District Forester?

I took a reluctant policeman from the Maryborough station to interview the blokes at the garage. All was admitted and they readily agreed to take a mechanical digger to the forest straight away and bury the carcass. This was done with all speed, but did not, in my view cancel the original offence. My report went off to Bendigo. In time, the Divisional mentor came to Maryborough and interviewed me, not in the office where the clerk would hear us, but in the nearby book-lined room in the Court House used by lawyers on Court days. I was advised and invited to review my recommendation to prosecute. A warning letter from the Commission would surely suffice. We argued, for I did not want to back down, but I yielded when he played a high trump. The divisional recommendation accompanying my report and recommendation to Head Office would oppose mine, in such terms that the senior recommendation would succeed. So we learn our place.

An Unexpected Assignment

My time working at Maryborough came to an unexpected end when the Principal of the School of Forestry at Creswick went to Louisiana for a year, and the Commission instructed me to work full-time at the School. A single officer would be appointed acting district forester, and I would live on in the quarters at Maryborough during 1957. Although I had no duties in the District, I had been told by telephone from Melbourne originally that the presumption was I would return to my former job when the year was up.

So ended my field days. I did not know that until the first term of 1958 at VSF was under way.