Life in Bush Camps

Assessment Training School, Kinglake West

My career as a staff member of the Forests Commission of Victoria formally began on Monday 8 January 1951. The twelve of my year from Creswick, now ex-students, gathered in Head Office, Melbourne, to be told we were to spend the next three months at an Assessment School to be held at a camp in the Kinglake West forest. There, we would be trained in the skills of surveying, mapping and assessing forests for the volume of milling timber available. It would also be a time for in-service induction.

At this time, 1951, forestry was a booming industry in Victoria. Timber was desperately needed for post-war reconstruction, both for housing and industrial development. Many new roads were being constructed through the mountain forests to provide access into new logging areas. The Commission needed to know the timber resource in areas ahead of logging and to have good maps for management planning. Hence, specialised staff were assigned to obtain this information. Most of the forests being opened up were in East Gippsland and the North East of the State.

The Kinglake West camp, where we were to be trained, had been built some years previously in a clearing in the forest to accommodate prisoners of war and, later, migrants assigned to forestry work, but it was no longer used for this purpose. A permanent camp, it contained a large mess hut and kitchen, a toilet block, a dormitory hut divided into small rooms for individual accommodation and other storage sheds. It was well suited for our purpose.
A Forester’s Tale

Our instructor was Harry Prewett, a forester about four years our senior and a ‘veteran’ of several assessment camps. At the end of February he left to attend University and was replaced by Peter Britton, two years our senior.

Many days were spent in the surrounding forest, in groups of three, learning the techniques of forest assessment and mapping. Other days were spent in camp doing the associated paperwork, plotting the surveys, drawing the maps, calculating timber volumes, etc. Sometimes a visiting speaker would address us on some aspect of departmental interest.

Ten days into my career, i.e. on Thursday 18 January I received my first fortnightly salary cheque, for the grand amount of £14.19.11. I did not receive as much as some of the others as I was under 21 years of age. That was the system in those days. Salaries of officers of the Forests Commission were not very generous at that time. I often heard stories from foresters who complained that the pay cheques they wrote for their labouring staff were often larger than their own. However, whatever the size of the cheque, every second Thursday thereafter was special.

Our training was interrupted by bushfires. All but four of us were sent off to join in fighting a large fire at Kennedy’s Creek in the Otways. Those of us left behind did not languish for long as several days later we were called to Woods Point and spent several days controlling fire edges along the upper Goulburn River.

On the Australia Day holiday we were called to a fire south of Kinglake West. It was fairly small and soon controlled. On the way back I can remember passing through an apple orchard and sampling a few of the products before leaving. My mother was later shocked to hear that her son had “stolen some apples”!

We had several trips to see forestry operations. On one occasion we visited the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works Wallaby Creek catchment area nearby with its extensive mountain ash forests and some young plantations. This was a rare privilege as the catchment was closed to visitors (and still is). It was Melbourne’s first water catchment, designed to supply the Yan Yean Reservoir.
Some of us were attracted to the idea of life in assessment camps. I was hoping to be selected, as working in remote forests seemed to me to be an exciting prospect. I wanted to experience some of the ‘unmapped mountain country’ I had dreamed of at Creswick during the previous years. On the other hand some of the other boys were not attracted to this lifestyle and set their minds to work in a Forest District. As it turned out I think most of us got the appointment we hoped for as our aspirations were probably evident in our attitude and results of testing at the end of the camp. Four of us, Len Laing, Jack Channon, Athol Hodgson and I, were appointed to native forest assessment, David Paterson and Ken Nicholls to plantation assessment, and the other six to District work. Len and I were to work together at one location over the winter, as were Jack and Athol at another.

The school finished on 12 April, and we went home in expectation of the next stage in our career when the real work would begin.

Log Measurement Camp, Strathbogie Ranges

Len Laing and I were assigned to assess the Blue Range forest, north of Mansfield, with Peter Britton as our party leader. Jack Channon and Athol Hodgson were to assess an area in Gippsland between Heyfield and Walhalla. However, their camp would not be ready for some time so they were assigned to work with us for the time being.

Before commencing at Blue Range we were directed to go to the northern Strathbogie Ranges in order to measure logs which would provide data for preparation of log volume tables. We travelled there on 17 April and stayed for nearly a month, accommodated in the Mt Separation camp which had been used by an assessment party the previous year.

The log measuring campsite in the Strathbogie Ranges.

The camp comprised three Stanley huts and was quite adequate for our needs, except that there was no toilet block. In its place I was introduced to the use of a toilet pit and bucket shower. The camp was sheltered in a gully and surrounded by tall gums and was well into the forest. Many years later, when working in the Warrenbayne pine plantation, I was shown the site of the camp but could not recognise it, for the tall native gums had been replaced by a ten year old pine plantation.

We spent most days visiting recently logged sites and took the required measurements along the boles of felled trees as they lay on the ground by the stump. The forests were mainly of blue gum, manna gum and peppermint, with relatively sparse shrubby vegetation and were pleasant places in which to work. The weather was good, and we enjoyed each other’s company. It was in this setting that I first learned to cook a roast dinner. (In recent years Iris would say that I have rested on my laurels ever since!)

By May 10 we had finished this work and packed up camp preparatory to leaving for the Blue Range.
Assessment Camp, Blue Range

The Blue Range lies about 15 km north of Mansfield and is clearly visible from that town. It runs northwards for about 10 km, with its highest point, Mt Samaria, 3150 feet (1000 m) at the north end. South of Mt Samaria is an elevated plateau which carries fine stands of messmate, peppermint, manna gum and blue gum. The eastern slopes of the Blue Range are steep, falling over 1000 feet from the ridge which marks the eastern boundary of the plateau. In places these slopes are like an escarpment. No road existed up to the plateau in 1951, though one was constructed soon afterwards.

Twenty years previously an attempt had been made to harvest the timber on the plateau. A sawmill and drying kilns were constructed on the northern part of the plateau close to Wild Dog Creek. Transport of logs to the mill, and sawn timber from the mill, was undertaken on a bush tramway system. To get to market the sawn timber on its rail cars had to be lowered down a very steep incline down the eastern escarpment, from where it was taken along Spring Creek then out into the cleared country northwards to Tatong and Benalla, a long way. The business failed on account of the high cost of transporting the timber to market and the poor economic conditions of the Depression years. Actually, the timber resource on the plateau would not have sustained the operation for long. We were easily able to identify the areas that had been logged because they carried excellent regrowth stands of young 20-year-old messmate. None of this was known to us when we transferred from the Strathbogies to the Blue Range on Friday 11 May 1951.

We reported to the District Forest Officer, Jim Westcott, at the Mansfield Forest Office, purchased our food supplies, and set off northwards in our two Land Rovers, with Len riding his motorbike. Entering the forest and crossing the ford across the Blue Range Creek, we followed the track northward along the base of the steep eastern escarpment. At one point we encountered a short steep greasy section of track which the motorbike could not pass, so we all had to get out of our Land Rovers and manhandle the bike up the slope. Len never attempted to ride the bike into camp again as the tracks deteriorated with the onset of winter. The next time the bike was ridden was to leave the area at the end of the job!

Our camp was an abandoned farmhouse on cleared land that had been bought by the Commission a few years earlier. It was a ‘spartan’ house, but served us well. Len and I shared a front bedroom with walls lined with newspaper. We had cyclone wire bed frames with a palliasse filled with straw for a mattress – quite comfortable when one got used to it – and we expected nothing better. From the front verandah there was a good view to the north over the cleared paddocks and down the valley. Forested hills were all around and we were quite isolated. It rained during our first two days and we got the feel that this was going to be a common occurrence during our stay in the area.
Locality map of the Blue Range assessment
We started our work by driving along tracks and looking for fence-lines and corners of private property which we would need to incorporate in our survey of the area.

During the first day we came across some woodcutters who we found were officials of the Mansfield Football Club and we were invited to join in football training that evening. Len and I joined the Club and went to training every Tuesday evening. Over the following weeks we were selected to play in the seconds against teams from Euroa, Thornton, Yea, Seymour, and others, but being a newcomer from out of town I found it difficult to settle into the team and my game was not as good as it had been at Creswick. We would use these visits into Mansfield on Saturdays and Tuesdays for the purchase of supplies and pickup of mail. Also, we would often have an evening meal at a cafe then go to the pictures, getting back to camp after midnight. Driving the forest tracks at night became quite a challenge as the winter progressed.

We then undertook a lengthy period of surveying the tracks and the adjacent private property boundaries. Len and I were the team leaders and at first were assisted by Jack and Athol. Soon our numbers were increased by arrival of some young men from Melbourne who had applied for bushwork. We felt the Personnel Section did a good job in selecting people for us, as all five fitted in very well once they got used to the work. The physical demands of bushwork in the mountains was quite new to them.

We had to do some reconnaissance to become familiar with the plateau and to determine the route our survey would follow along the western edge, so as to exclude the steep western slopes which carried no commercial timber. This involved some long days of exploration for Pete, Len and myself, climbing up the eastern escarpment, then across the plateau. We enjoyed the challenge though we got soaking wet and late back on some occasions. In the course of this familiarisation we located the old sawmill site and some of the rotting remains of the tramline.

We worked AWU (Australian Workers Union) hours, which meant leaving camp about 7.40 am each morning to arrive at the start of the day’s work at about 8.00 am. The length of the working day depended on the length of the assessment strip to be undertaken, and various other factors such
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as the steepness, density of scrub, weather and so on. Some days we finished early but other times we were not home till dark. There was no overtime paid, we just accepted the good with the bad.

Two weeks after our arrival, on Thursday 24 May, I celebrated my 21st birthday. It was a wet day, so we were restricted to camp and I used the time to plot the survey data for the boundary of the area we were to assess. My mother had made a large fruit cake for the occasion, so this was produced after the evening meal. She had also given me a radio powered by two large batteries which was well appreciated at my camps over the next couple of years.

After Jack and Athol left in mid-June there were eight of us in camp – three foresters and five employees. Each day we would have two field parties of three, with Len and me in charge, each of us supported by two employees, one to work as compassman and front chainman and the other as rear chainman. The remaining employee was rostered to stay in camp each day to do the cooking duties and read the base barometer, which recorded the change in atmospheric pressure during the day to enable us to correct the height readings from our field barometers. Peter had a roving job, liaising with the District and other supervisory work.

One day when surveying along a fence, one of my party put a foot in a dingo trap. A few minutes later another trap was sprung, this time by me. The traps had been carefully concealed on the ground exactly where a wild dog would place its foot to pass over a fallen branch. Fortunately no injury resulted as our boots gave sufficient protection from the steel jaws. The landowner would not have expected a group of foresters to walk along the fence-line! We had various sightings of wildlife. Wombats were quite common on the plateau. When I gave chase I found they could run through the scrub faster than I. There were hundreds of lyrebird mounds on the steep eastern slopes of the escarpment. We regularly heard the lyrebird calls as we worked our way up those slopes but we never saw a bird, as the tall bracken and other scrub provided ample cover. One day I was on my own checking heights at a certain location when I became aware of a fox approaching. I stood perfectly still and watched the animal. It continued to approach, aware of me, passed about five metres from me, and continued on its way, soon to be out of sight.
Our surveys along tracks and fences around the perimeter of the forest took longer than we expected due to wet weather and the long length of survey through the forest along the western side of the plateau. Eventually, when completed, I had trouble plotting the data. All our measurements and compass bearings had been double checked in the field, and where our boundary followed fence lines we could also check our measurements with those on the Lands Department Parish Plans. However, our forest overlapped portions of three Parish maps. After much checking I came to the conclusion that there was a 3 chain (65 m) discrepancy somewhere between two of those Parishes, of which the early surveyors probably had not been aware. Having come to the conclusion that our survey was correct we were able to proceed.

By the end of June we were ready to commence the assessment work proper. We assessed strips one chain wide through the forest. The strips were spaced 20 chains apart and parallel. It was my job to record trees up to one half chain on each side of our line, by species, diameter and expected length of sawlog, and as well to record the topographic features and altitudes necessary for preparation of a contour map. The compassman’s job was to follow our bearing as closely as possible. He and the rear chainman measured the distances along our strip. We would stop briefly after each 10 chains of strip in order to make allowances for errors in measurement due to slope and weaving through scrub. Furthermore, the area of forest assessed along each 10 chains of strip (10 square chains) was equal to one acre, the unit of area used in those days.

I particularly liked the mapping component of the job. Although one could usually only see 2-3 chains on each side of the tape, with experience one could draw the creeks, ridges and contour lines to a further distance with reasonable accuracy and connect the same features recorded on adjacent strips, 20 chains apart. The drawing of the final contour lines on the map at 50 foot intervals was done in the office on wet days. The barometer measurements taken along each strip had to be adjusted for changes in air pressure during the day as recorded back at camp, and then each of the 50 foot contours were drawn to follow the form lines recorded in the field and then joined up from strip to strip.

I was able to get home to Melbourne three times during our four months at Blue Range. Following the first visit I must have relaxed on my habit of writing weekly, for some time later, perhaps more than two weeks, I received a message from Dad, relayed through the Mansfield Forest Office, “Please contact home immediately. Your mother has not heard from you and is worried”. I diligently followed my letter writing schedule after that!
During my third visit home I decided to return on the Sunday by hitch-hiking up the Hume Highway. I had done it successfully before, but this time it did not go according to plan. I was in position on the roadside out of Melbourne by 10.00 am but the many cars did not stop for me. I only reached Benalla by 3.00 pm and immediately took the road south to Tatong but not one car passed my way. I walked and walked......over 20 km! Two and a half hours later, past Tatong, as darkness fell, I reached the home of farming friends, the Crowe family. I was still too far from camp to continue walking in the dark, so I spent the night on Crowe’s sofa! Next morning one of our Land Rovers came past looking for me. So I returned to camp, collected my bush gear, and was soon off on a day’s work.

The paddocks of the old farm were infested with rabbits. This was most noticeable to us at night when, returning from an evening in Mansfield, our vehicle’s headlamps would light up a multitude of the grazing animals each time a new paddock came into view. It would then seem that the paddocks moved as the rabbits ran away. We would often go for a walk to shoot a rabbit for dinner. Sometimes we didn’t even have to leave the house, as we could take aim from the verandah!

In mid-August, one Saturday I was in camp washing clothes when mail was received from Mansfield. One of the letters contained my fortnightly pay cheque. I was elated to find that my pay had been raised from £14.19.11 to £20.10.9 in recognition that I was now an adult (21 years of age). Moreover, it also contained back pay of £31.9.9 for the period since my 21st birthday. I had never known such riches before and I felt that I was now rewarded for the hard work of the past few months.

One morning we woke to find we were in a snowstorm and our surroundings a white-out. This provided a few hours of fun. The frequent wet weather not only slowed the progress of our work but badly affected the condition of the tracks. We even had one of our four-wheel-drive Land Rovers bogged on one of the tracks. For this reason, as the winter progressed, we chose to take a much longer route to Mansfield via Tolmie rather than risk the direct bush track, particularly at night. Our tyres also became worn and we had trouble with flat tyres.
Finally the last days of fieldwork were completed and we were able to pack up. In many ways it was a relief to get away and it was my hope that the next assignment would be in a warmer and drier place. However, it was a fascinating area, perhaps because it was the first of my forest assessments. I enjoyed the physical and mental challenges we encountered. One of my most pleasurable memories of the area is that of sitting on the top of a granitic outcrop on the western edge of the plateau, in the sunshine, on several occasions, eating lunch while gazing down over the Midland Highway in the valley below, across to the Strathbogie Ranges to the west, and to the Mansfield valley and Eildon country to the south. This stunning view from a high point has remained with me as a memory of the wonderful world in which we live.
Assessment Camp, Sandy’s Creek, Bulumwaal

The conditions for our summer assessment were quite different from those of our winter at Blue Range. We were surrounded by continuous and almost undisturbed forest for a great distance in all directions, the nearest settlement being the small village of Bulumwaal with its sawmill, about 20 km to the south of us. Bairnsdale was a further 20 km to the south again. Our access was the Mt Baldhead Road which traversed northward along the divide between the Wentworth and Nicholson Rivers. Beyond our camp this road continued northward to Mt Baldhead and then turned northeast towards the Swifts Creek valley.

Peter Britton, Len Laing and I were to be together again for the summer assessment. We left Melbourne on 25 September 1951 in a Land Rover and Chevrolet utility, but on reaching the Commission’s Sub-district Headquarters at Mt Taylor, between Bairnsdale and Bulumwaal, where Frank May was the Forester in charge, we learned that our camp was not quite ready, it being still under construction by Sam Bruton and an assistant.

Locality map for Sandy’s Creek assessment
For the first few days we camped at the Mt Taylor Depot. I remember going on a bush inspection with Frank and also meeting George Curtis, the Forest Overseer, who also lived near the Depot. Over the following months we had a lot to do with Frank and also his wife Lucy. After a few days our camp was ready and we moved in but the first week was mostly devoted to preparing it for our occupation.

The area we were to assess was the upper portion of the Sandy’s Creek watershed on the western slopes off the Mt Baldhead Road. Our camp was located in the head of a gully, not far below the road. Many years before, a track had been cleared down to a point where a horizontal tunnel had been cut by gold miners into the hill for a considerable distance to connect with a vertical mineshaft on the ridge nearby. We never heard if any gold had been found, though it had in other parts of the area, but the tunnel tapped a spring which flowed out of the entrance as a continuous stream of pure cold water.

Our camp was situated on the narrow track which accessed the tunnel. Two Stanley huts had been transported into position near the tunnel entrance. The larger one served as our kitchen and for communal living, and the smaller one was our office and store. Five tents were arranged in a line above this. There was barely enough room to turn our vehicles which were parked beyond the tents. A small vertical shaft was found close below the camp. When a seat was constructed over this we had a ready-made toilet. A frame was erected nearby to carry a bucket shower. Thus, all our needs were provided. With the forest of tall trees on all sides we were truly ‘in the bush’.

One of the popular songs on the radio at the time was about a traveller who struggled across deserts and experienced great thirst until he reached some life-giving cool water. This song took our imagination as we expected much dry work in the forest, and we were appreciative of our unusual supply of cool water. During one particularly cold spell of weather a third “o” was added to the word “cool” and this was adopted as the name of our camp – “Cooool Waters”. We put up a sign to this effect on the roadside above at the turnoff to our camp.
Once the camp was settled we started on our surveys of the roads around our area. Two of our chainmen from Blue Range, Fred Whiting and Jim Cummings, decided to continue with us, which enabled a smooth start in the new area. We also had two Poles, Joe Kurowski and Lucian Krugly, assisted migrants who had been ‘displaced persons’ in Europe. Under the conditions of their acceptance to Australia they were required to work for a given period in whatever places they were assigned. They were unaccustomed to bush work and found it hard at first, but they undertook it without complaint and we found them to be quite reliable. They were with us for the duration of the job, but there were frequent changes of personnel among our other workers. They were not accustomed to the physical demands of the bush work and the isolation of the camp. One person arrived on a Monday and left on the Friday. However, we used to go to Bairnsdale most Saturdays, but also made visits to other places such as Bruthen, Paynesville, Lakes Entrance, and even panned for gold in the Nicholson River. We would usually go to the pictures in Bairnsdale followed by a late return to camp, or we would sleep at the Mt Taylor Depot so as to return to Bairnsdale the following day. I always took my sleeping bag with me on such occasions. There were many rabbits on the farms around Mt Taylor, so rabbit stew often featured in our menus.

The forest in the region of Sandy’s Creek comprised a seeming endless succession of ridges and valleys, stretching to the horizon in all directions. It certainly fulfilled the dream of ‘unmapped mountain country’ I had at Creswick. Access roads had been constructed along some of the main ridges but the areas in between were extensive. Silvertop was a common eucalypt along the ridge tops. The north facing slopes were dry with relatively poor tree growth, but the south facing slopes were moister, carrying large trees of messmate and grey gum, ferns and shrubs. Many years later this type of forest was classified as HEMS – high elevation mixed species.
In late October I managed to get a trip to Melbourne to obtain stores. This fortunately coincided with Ken Nicholls’ 21st birthday party in East Kew. On other weekend occasions Len and I took a Land Rover to Mt Skene to visit Jack and Athol at their assessment.

Leon plotting survey measurements while a meal is being prepared in the background.

Len Laing and Leon on the way to Mallacoota.

Late in our period Len and I went to Mallacoota on Len’s motorbike which had been garaged at Mt Taylor. I travelled both ways as a pillion passenger. In those days the highway had not been sealed, so you can be sure I ended the weekend very sore. The camp closed down between Christmas and New Year when most of us went to Melbourne and some to Bairnsdale. So I never felt depressed through isolation. On the contrary, I enjoyed every day of life in this strange area and the challenge of doing the job, while learning as much as possible about it.

By early November we had completed the survey of the main Sandy’s Creek block and commenced the strips through it with mapping and tree tallying. The weather was unpredictable. Several times we started out only to be caught in rain when well into the middle of an area. On one particular occasion we were caught in a sudden thunderstorm of such unprecedented fury that we were concerned for our safety. We happened to be working along a ridge top which received the full force of the gale and the branches above were waving about uncontrollably. We immediately left our tape on the ground and moved down the lee side of the ridge where the winds were greatly reduced. We didn’t want to be victims of a lightning strike or a large falling limb.

When caught in rain the paper on my tally board became saturated and writing became difficult. On some such times the pencil would make no mark, only a depression in the paper. On return to the
camp the paper would be dried out and I would carefully go over the surface and rewrite the details following the indentations.

Several wildlife observations are worth recording. There were snakes in the forest, mainly copperheads, but we rarely saw them, as I expect they moved out of our way as we approached through the scrub. One day in late summer we came upon a pair of snakes twined together copulating. We watched motionless. Then when one of our group moved the snakes disengaged and darted off in opposite directions. What a shame to disturb them in such a private act! There were some wild dogs in the area and Len shot one soon after our arrival. One day as we worked through a section of forest on our fixed bearing, we became aware of a group of dogs several chains away. They did not bother us and we continued on our way. I wonder if it was a lair with young ones and what would have happened if our line happened to pass through them.

During November we were given a young kelpie pup from someone in Mt Taylor. This pleased our guys who played with it. However, it had eight masters and probably became quite confused and difficult to control. We had to send it back before Christmas.

Firefighting proved to be an unexpected but important part of our activities that summer. Our first fire occurred late in November. I was returning to camp after a trip to Bairnsdale and observed that the forest along the sides of the road was burning. We were aware that the Overseer, George Curtis, had been conducting fuel reduction burns. However, dry windy weather had caused the fires to spread rapidly out of control instead of fading out. Early next morning we were called out to assist Frank May and the Mt Taylor gang to suppress it on the Woollybutt Spur, a ridge running eastwards from the Mt Baldhead Road fairly near our camp. We spent two long days trying to contain the fire and were only spared a longer time by the advent of rain. Over the next few days the smoke from smouldering trees pervaded the atmosphere. We would occasionally hear the thump of a falling tree. This episode was merely a practice run for what was to follow. It started a long way from our area but eventually engulfed us!

We had returned to camp after the Christmas break and resumed our work of surveying and assessment. Word was received of a fire near Dargo and we were needed to assist the suppression effort. On Sunday January 20 we left for Dargo and spent a full week there. The days were long and hard. Sometimes I would be walking ahead to determine the extent of outbreaks, other times there was feverish activity to hold fire edges in areas where property was threatened, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. On one occasion we were driving into Dargo and saw a fire front...
burning towards a wooden bridge. We were carrying a fire pump and there was water in the creek under the bridge, so we quickly set up the pump and saved the bridge, just in time. I had my camera with me and managed to get some snaps of the action. However, in the rush of the moment I forgot to wind on the film and later found a double-exposed picture of two men hosing each other!

Bushfire in the Stony Creek valley beyond the Lasich homestead. A double exposure, NOT a water fight

We camped out under the stars and had an occasional wash when there was time for a swim in the nearby Wonnangatta River.

Two particular memories of this week have remained in my mind. At the end of one day after a long, hard, but successful time at the fire front, we went into Dargo and the men all headed for the hotel. I had no desire to go there, but there was little else for me to do so I followed. Inside, the publican was giving out drinks. When asked what I would like, feeling famished, I said “milk”. Without hesitation the publican told an assistant to go and fetch some milk and a few minutes later it was brought to me – a billy full of it! I drank the lot!

During the week we had several visits to the Lasich farm to get to the fire front beyond. Situated near the confluence of Stony Creek and the Dargo River, there never was, and probably never will be, another farm like this one. It was shared by three Lasich brothers, aged in their 50’s. Originally there had been four brothers, but the eldest left the farm to serve in the Australian army during the Great War. While in England he met his wife and their son Bruce (Hank) was the forester who had taught us Engineering at Creswick the previous year. Meanwhile, the three younger brothers stayed home on the farm and learned nothing in their isolation. The weekly trip into Dargo for stores (about 10 km distant), and once or twice over the years to Bairnsdale, were the limit of their travels. The farm was primitive, the fences poor, the gates held by unique pieces of bent wire, and the small log hut contained smoked slabs of meat hanging inside from the rafters. It was indeed remarkable for us to meet these bachelor uncles of our former forestry lecturer.

A weather change occurred and on the second day of drizzle, Sunday 27th, a week after our arrival, we were allowed to return to normal duties. After purchasing stores on the way, we arrived at Coool Waters at 7.00 pm.

Next day, Monday 28th, was the Australia Day holiday, and we went into Bairnsdale for relaxation and to release one of our chainmen who had had enough of his job with us. That evening, in Bairnsdale, we went to the cinema to see ‘Daughter of Rosie O’Grady’. Imagine our surprise when during the show a notice was displayed on the screen - “Would Leon and Len return to Mt Taylor immediately”! Frank May had known where we would be and this was his way, with the help of a
co-operative theatre manager, to get us back to duty immediately. It transpired that fresh smoke had been seen somewhere along the Wentworth River area, and it was surmised that the fire edge east of Dargo had not been wholly extinguished by the rain and had started up again. So, after hearing this news at Mt Taylor, we continued on to Cool Waters camp late that night.

Early the following morning (Tuesday) Pete, Lu and I drove north up the Baldhead Road to a point where the Friday Spur ran south-westwards to the Wentworth River. We had been told by Frank May that the location of the smoke, as sighted from fire towers, was estimated to be somewhere near the junction of Friday Spur and the river. Except for a short distance in from the Baldhead Road there was no vehicular track along the ridge and down to the river, a distance of about 6 km. So we set off on foot, walking down the spur.

By midday we had located the fire. It was burning on both sides of the river. There was nothing we could do, so after a reconnaissance we started on our return. At about 7.30 pm we met Frank May’s Mt Taylor gang coming in and briefed them on what we had found. We then continued on our way through the bush in the dark, finally staggering out to the Land Rover and eventually arriving back at camp at 10.30 pm.

Since the fire was attended by the local gang and presumably not of significant size, we were not required for fire duties the next day, but remained in camp with office duties.

The following day we were instructed to leave early and carry food and blankets down the Friday Spur to the Mt Taylor gang. We drove the short distance of track down the Friday Spur, parked our two Land Rovers in a small clearing, then set off on foot with the supplies, repeating the long hard walk to the Wentworth River. We met the others near the river at 11.45 and had lunch together. By this time the wind had sprung up and hot northerlies were fanning the fire. It was soon apparent that the fire was beyond control and was rampaging. This was the first time I heard the fearful roar of a forest inferno as the fire raced up the far side of a nearby hill.

There was nothing we could do but move on to freshly burned ground and watch as the fire tore through the bush on the spur down which we had recently walked, the hot wind driving it. After a while we tried to walk back up the spur in the direction of our vehicles, but to no avail, as there was too much fire and smoke. We went back to the Wentworth River, met up with the others, and had some food. With night coming on we shared the blankets for warmth, but around midnight light rain began to fall and the blankets became damp, so we sat up in front of a campfire all night.
We walked out the next morning. Before leaving, we decided to leave the tinned food in a heap on burned ground for later retrieval, its weight being too much for us at that time. We set off at first light, wet through. Though the walk back along the Friday Spur was long, there were no impediments to our progress as the fire had consumed all the scrub.

As we neared the place where the vehicles had been left our fears rose, for we were still in burned ground. Then the Land Rovers came into view and I could not believe my eyes. The fire had burned all around them and beyond, leaving a small area of about 50 m diameter unburned, like an island in a sea of black, with the vehicles unharmed in the middle. It was a huge relief as I had not been relishing having to explain to the Commission how I had let two Land Rovers be incinerated! We got back to Cool Waters by 12.30 and enjoyed lunch, dry clothes and relaxation, in whatever order.

The hot weather had moderated so we had a chance to take stock of the fire front and try to protect against any further outbreak. Although the wet change had doused the fire edge, smouldering logs remained which could ignite new fires when dry conditions returned. However, the area of burned forest was large and the country was hilly and steep. Fingers of fire had burned along northern slopes to a much greater extent than along southern slopes, so that the perimeter of burned edge that needed to be patrolled far exceeded the capacity of our men. So we had to concentrate on those parts of the fire edge that appeared most strategic should outbreaks occur. Our camp had now become a base for all the firefighters. It was Saturday February 2.

The following two days were spent patrolling fire edges, directing the sawmill bush crew and bulldozer into certain areas to mop up small outbreaks, and back-burning along the Morris’s Peak Road. By this time the weather had warmed up again and the wind changed to the north. Some plumes of smoke indicated active fires were developing, not too far away. We hurried to do back burning as we did not want to risk the fire getting into the Sandy’s Creek catchment. Frank May and I spent the evening on night patrol driving along the Baldhead and Morris’s Peak Roads returning by 2.45 am. We ate a meal and went to bed at about the time others were getting up.
There had been a hot northerly blowing all night. A new fuel pump was fitted to my Land Rover as I had had fuel trouble for several days.

After a few hours sleep I was up again and out in a Land Rover to see conditions along the Morris’s Peak Road. It was very hot and the dense smoke was a bad omen. It was apparent that we would have to rely on the effectiveness of the back-burning undertaken the previous day. However, insufficient men were available to properly patrol and attend to weak spots. The winds and temperature increased, and visibility declined. There was heavy smoke everywhere. It became apparent that this was to be another blow-up day, but this time the camp would be right in the fire’s path. The camp was hastily packed, the tents and all possessions taken away by truck. This was completed just in time as the advancing fire had jumped the Morris’s Peak Road and closed in on the Mt Baldhead Road. This road was cut by the fire soon after the truck and other vehicles made their way southwards.

Four of us decided to stay behind. We expected the tunnel would provide a safe refuge and we wanted to be on hand to do anything required after the fire passed. Accordingly, Peter Britton, Len Laing, Fred Whiting and I removed food from the mess hut, erected a blanket inside the opening of the tunnel and moved in behind it. As the fire front engulfed the camp we threw water over the blanket from the inside, but the smoke came in around it and we were forced to retreat up the tunnel. It was not hot, but the smoke pursued us as we felt our way inwards to where we hoped to be safe for the time being. It was at least 15 minutes, maybe longer, before we could tell the fire had passed. The roar of the fire diminished as did the smoke entering the tunnel.

We emerged to a blackened, smoking world. Our mess hut was intact but here and there the external woodwork was on fire. We were quickly able to douse these and save our major asset. Our tent poles and flooring were unaffected but covered with ash. We returned the food to the mess hut and started to clean up the site. We had taken a portable radio into the tunnel so we were soon able to communicate our safety to those at Mt Taylor, including Lucy May who had been very apprehensive about us. She had spent many hours during this period attending to radio communications. So before long Frank May and George Curtis arrived at the camp and took us back to Mt Taylor which now became our base for some days.

The weather had changed again and cool conditions allowed us a day of respite. A day later there were still active areas of fire and we commenced back-burning along the Blazes and Tabberabbera Roads. It rained lightly on the Saturday night, so next morning we went back to Mt Taylor. No outbreaks were reported on the east side of the Mt Baldhead Road. Apparently the fuel reduction burns undertaken by George Curtiss along that road during the previous spring had been effective.

On Monday 11th we returned to Coool Waters, cleaned up the site, repitched our tents and settled in again. The weather was mild and although smoke was rising in several places we were not required all the time, and were able to continue our assessment work. We were, however, called upon on some days to attend the fire edge of several isolated occurrences that were generating smoke. The big bushfire was not going to give up without a whimper! At last, on Saturday 16th, at the Pheasant Creek outbreak, to the north, as we controlled the fire edge we heard thunder all afternoon and eventually walked out of the area in the rain. That was the end of the fire which had lasted a whole month, from January 19 to February 17. It was only an inch of rain on Sunday 17th that finally put it out!
It was back to assessing now, but the bush work was different. The scrub had been burnt, so the walking was easier and one could see the lie of the land more readily, though one tended to get dirty through contact with charcoal and ash.

There was a sequel to the bushfire. I had remembered that at the end of the Friday Spur near the Wentworth River there was a cache of tinned food and tarpaulin left behind by the Mt Taylor fire crew. I decided this was worth the long walk both ways to retrieve. Accordingly I and two others undertook the walk and found the spot about midday. However, to our dismay the tins had all been scorched and exploded, and the tarpaulin was no more. The only item worth retrieving was a frypan. This was a surprise because I distinctly remembered that the items had been left in a burned area. Apparently it had only been partly burned and there was enough residual fuel for the site to burn a second time, probably on the very bad day. I have never heard of anything like this before or since. Anyway, we returned with the pan and thought it all a great joke.

On another occasion we were working at the end of a long track down the Seldom Seen Spur. When we started our return in the Land Rover I noticed the engine temperature warning light and on checking under the bonnet found the fan belt to be missing. It was a very long way to walk back to camp. The solution was hanging on my shoulder – my camera – which I frequently carried in the bush. The shoulder strap was about the right length and when fitted in place of the fan belt it had enough grip to turn the fan. This was sufficient to get us back to camp!

By the end of March we had completed our work. Our remaining chainmen needed to be paid and transferred to other work. We packed up the camp, dropped off some equipment at Mt Taylor and returned to Melbourne on Friday April 4. As if in protest our Land Rover’s radiator boiled as we passed through Dandenong and we had a flat tyre before reaching Kew.
A Winter in Melbourne

I was required to work in the Melbourne office for the next six months in order to prepare reports on the assessments at Blue Range and Sandy’s Creek. These reports were to include the summation of sawlog volumes at each of the two areas and preparation of the topographical maps. The office was located in Lygon Street, Carlton, in a former school building. This location was very convenient for me as the North Kew bus service provided me with almost door to door transport. The winter assignment was very timely for me as it gave me the opportunity to get to know Iris.

In February 1952, when camped at Cooool Waters in East Gippsland, I was involved with bushfires which eventually burned through our camp, as I have described above. I reported my adventures of sheltering in the tunnel while the fire raged overhead, and emerging in time to save our mess hut, in a letter to my mother. She immediately conveyed the story to her circle of church friends which included Mrs Arnold, from whom Iris then heard of it (probably well embellished by this time). Iris could not recollect me from any previous occasions but she said she developed a curiosity to see the person who had had such an experience. She had to wait a month or so. These two events, the carolling and bushfires, have taught me that a guy has to do something exceptional to get the attention of certain women!

Living at home and working in the Melbourne office for a lengthy period during 1952, I had opportunities to observe Iris on Sundays. The youth group was active on many Sunday evenings after church, including sing songs in the parsonage. I noticed Iris played the piano very well and that she was one of the leaders.

During May-June I was away accompanying my father for six weeks on a tour of northern Australia, for him to inspect the work of the Methodist Inland Mission, of which he was Director. We arrived home on a Sunday. At church that evening I was sitting among other guys near the back, when looking at the choir, which included Iris, high up in the front behind the pulpit, I distinctly saw her smile at me. This was most unexpected, though very exciting. I wondered if she was in the habit of smiling at the other boys from time to time.
A couple of months went by, with further activity among the youth group on Sundays. During that winter of 1952 I played football on Saturday afternoons with Ashburton Methodists. I had been invited to join that club by Max Boucher, a forester who was in Melbourne doing the forestry course at the University. I never attended the Ashburton church at that time, (though I did a few years later when Iris’s mother lived in Ashwood). The team had mixed success, finishing about half way down the ladder. To wind up the season the club held a dance at a venue in Burwood Road, Hawthorn. I was confronted with the decision of going on my own or finding a partner. I had been taking an increasing interest in Iris, from afar, and decided I would ask her to accompany me, though I delayed doing anything until the last moment, the Saturday morning. I asked my father for the loan of his car, which did not surprise him as I needed it to get to the dance anyway. I then sat in his office to use his phone to ensure privacy for the ensuing conversation. I looked up the phone number of the parsonage. Then the moment of decision had finally arrived. It could not be delayed any longer. ‘Will I, or won’t I?’ my mind debated. ‘Will I, or won’t I?’ Fortunately, ‘Will I?’ won, and I dialled the number. Mrs Arnold answered and at my request called Iris, who agreed to be my partner for the evening. I received this answer with pleasure and some relief. Well, we had a very successful night. Our dancing was not very good, as my experience with dancing was limited to a couple of barn dances in the Anglican Church hall at Creswick. But that did not matter as we found that we enjoyed each other’s company.

This evening ‘broke the ice’, so to speak. Iris responded with an invitation to partner her to a 21st birthday party for Beth Baker, a youth group member, a few weeks later. Because I had invited her first she felt able to invite me as a return favour and without any embarrassment. We will never know if she would have invited anyone without such an opening. Several weeks later there was another similar party to which I accompanied her. We were becoming quite attached to each other.

The youth group were planning for a weekend at Ferny Creek and had rented a large house for accommodation. Meals were not provided, and so it was that I was invited to join Mrs Arnold and Iris in deciding what food supplies to take. My experience in purchasing food for assessment camps was considered useful. Sixty years later Iris would scoff at any suggestion I could give advice on food procurement. The weekend was fun. During a walk through Sherbrook Forest I took my first photograph of Iris, seated by a waterfall. A few days later, at home, when I was printing an enlargement of the photo and my father saw it, he was most impressed and wondered what was going on.

Assessment Camps near Mt Wills and Mt Bogong

After spending the winter of 1952 in Melbourne working on the reports and maps of my two assessments, and even though my life blossomed socially, as I had got to know Iris, I looked forward to the summer in the forest again. This time I was appointed to be leader of an assessment near Glen Wills in alpine country in the North East of Victoria. This would be a new challenge.
In late October the time came for me to leave for the new assessment. As I said goodbye to Iris, we had our first kiss. Next morning I was on my way to an exciting time in the alpine forests. Three of us (Frank Gerraty, Ray Brash and I) left Melbourne in a Land Rover on 27 October 1952, reaching the (old) town of Tallangatta for the night. Next morning there was need to stock up with food and I gave Ray the job as he had plenty of experience in assessment camps. He must have been expecting a long period of isolation in the wilderness for he ordered on a grand scale. Our Land Rover was soon laden with a sack of potatoes and, among many other items, a four gallon tin of honey. (We still had honey left over at the end of summer!) While Ray was obtaining the food supplies I had need to report to the District Forester, Norm Endacott.

We then started on the long, but picturesque drive along the Omeo Highway. The first stage was 30 km through the farmlands of the Mitta valley to Mitta Mitta township. The road then followed alongside the Snowy Creek, crossed the Lightning Creek ford and wound up the long incline with its hundred and one bends, gaining height all the way, till it reached Dunstan’s logging area in the alpine ash forest. About 5 km further on, at about the highest point on the Omeo Highway, directly below the summit of Mount Wills, was a small clearing with a little weatherboard cottage which was to be our base for the next three months. It was called Sunnyside, although the abandoned site of the former gold mining village of Sunnyside was a couple of km further on. At about 1200 metres altitude the air was bracing and there was a magnificent view to the east of mountain after mountain, with Mt Kosciusko in the distance visible on clear days.

That evening, about 8.30 pm, Joe Morley, my Assessment Branch boss, arrived in his Dodge utility with Gordon Doran and Geoff Dowler (Joy Hodgson’s younger brother) from Orbost. The latter two had just completed fieldwork in East Gippsland (Thurra River) and Joe wanted to get them to Glen Wills as well as to ensure that we were suitably set up for our work. Next day, when we had located a couple of survey benchmarks Joe departed, knowing we had identified certain reference points.
Our little house had four rooms, only one of which could be used as a bedroom. We therefore erected six tents in a row with wooden floors made from timber we purchased from a Glen Valley sawmill. I took one of the tents as I preferred to sleep outside rather than be woken prematurely each morning by noises from the kitchen. Our water supply came in a continuous flow from a nearby creek, along a wooden flume which terminated near the back of the house (at waist height). It was always icy cold, so each morning when washing one’s face one would become alert very quickly.

We were very busy establishing camp and getting started. Though I had Iris in mind, I did not write immediately but waited till the second week. The Post Office was at Mitta Mitta, 40km away, with the result that the letter did not get delivered till about 2 weeks after my departure. Iris had been looking for such a letter much sooner and had become despondent which did not help her studies for her first year university exams. When the letter did arrive, her spirits picked up and we had regular to-and-fro correspondence thereafter.

We were in radio contact with the Commission’s Tallangatta office. Orders for food were relayed to the appropriate shops and then transported to us on the bus which serviced the Tallangatta to Omeo route, passing our door, each way daily. After a few weeks we became dissatisfied with this arrangement when the grocery store refused to give us a discount on our large orders, so we
transferred our custom to Purtle’s Store in Mitta Mitta where the price was no cheaper but the service was much better and the proprietor friendly.

In fine weather the locality was very pleasant. There were plenty of wet days but enough dry ones to get on with the job. The initial surveying of roads, tracks and ridges through the alpine ash forest was not difficult, but the work became much more strenuous later when we had to leave the tracks and follow fixed bearings through the steep countryside.

One day, late afternoon, we were sitting on our verandah enjoying the scenery when a young local man walked past driving a cow home to Glen Valley. After a short conversation he was offered a job with us and accepted. His name was Phil King (and this was his first job with the Forests Commission, after which he continued working for many years, becoming an Overseer in various Districts). Another day, a young man, Chris Collin came by on a motor bike from Lake Tyers with the intent of asking for a job, and was most relieved when we accepted him.

The complement of men, apart from myself, was:

- **Foresters**: Frank Gerraty, Gordon Doran, David Paterson
- **Mappers**: Frank Lloyd, Ray Brash, Ian Edwards
- **Chainmen**: Geoff Dowler, John Crawley, Phil King, Chris Collin, Dave McCabe.

Ian, an experienced assessor, left after a few weeks, so our maximum strength was eleven. We were then able to deploy three field parties each day. Two parties was standard in assessment camps but we needed to complete the Mt Wills area without delay, because later in the summer we were to move camp to a site near Mt Bogong.

Two weeks after our arrival, on November 11, after a cold night, we woke to find a carpet of snow 6 inches (15 cm) deep over everything. This caused a lot of frivolity. After breakfast, work not being possible under such conditions, we drove to the Mt Wills Ski Club hut, borrowed the toboggans and spent all morning at winter sports. The slope of the ski run was quite steep and it was hard work carrying the toboggans back up after each slide, but the downhill run, shared with 2-3 others, at high speed, half blinded by snow, bumping over half-covered rocks, and generally finishing each slide in a tangled mass of arms, legs and bodies, was more than enough reward.
Our sleeping quarter one snowy morning.

A couple of days later, the snow had vanished at Sunnyside, but still remained higher up. It was a fine day, so we decided it was a good time to extend our survey to the top of Mt Wills. Approaching along the easiest grade, from the north, we encountered snow about one mile from the summit and as we progressed closer it became deeper. The view from the top was glorious. That day we returned to camp with very ruddy complexions.

An old man lived on his own about a mile from our camp. He had lived in isolation for too long and had developed delusions. He carried a loaded rifle over his shoulder “to protect himself” and warned us to be careful of the wild animals, there being “eleven leopards and one tiger” roaming the hills nearby!

We had frequent vehicle trouble, with our Land Rover or Dodge truck out of action at intervals. Sometimes we were able to take them to Tallangatta for repairs, but other times the guys did our own maintenance and somehow kept them running. One morning neither vehicle was available for use, so I decided to use the passing bus for one party to get to their starting point five miles away.

Although the work was hard, we were all young and fit and had excess energy. After the evening meal we frequently played football or cricket.

There was room for a small garden in front of the house, enclosed by a fence, but nothing grew except grass. I thought we should grow something useful, so sowed some pea seeds. The peas came up and grew well until one day returning to camp we found the gate open and the peas gone. A wandering cow had demolished the lot!

At weekends we sometimes visited Glen Valley where we found tennis courts (and eventually a net), or went fishing or shooting. My attempts at fishing were unsuccessful, but with shooting I astounded myself one day by hitting two rabbits with one shot! - and they were not exactly in line! One Saturday we went to Omeo, and on another occasion David Paterson and I got a ride down to Bruthen and stayed overnight with our friend Athol Hodgson, the Assistant Forester there.
One Saturday night we went to a dance at Glen Wills and found it to be a very simple country turnout. It was held in an old wooden hall lined with paper which was peeling off in large pieces. Apparently all of the Glen Wills population (4) was there and about half of Glen Valley (50). A lady played the music on a squeeze-box and the mothers brought all their children, some of whom fell asleep during the proceedings. We went again to another dance the Saturday before Christmas. It was the community Christmas Party at which Ray Brash was recruited to be Santa.

One Saturday I and two others went searching for a waterfall on the eastern side of the Highway below an old sawmill site. We found two spectacular falls on creeks which converged together. The second fall must have had a sheer drop of 100 feet or so. This waterfall must surely rank as the best in Victoria, but it is hardly known.
While we were working around Mt Wills another experienced member of the Assessment Branch, Bill Hardy, was located at Mitta Mitta to work with a bulldozer driver constructing a jeep track from Granite Flat along a long spur leading up towards Mt Bogong. At one point the track had to be cleared through a dense stand of young alpine ash regeneration on a very steep slope, known as Bull Hill, after which the spur continued fairly level till it reached a clearing with a cattlemen’s hut in the centre, known as ‘The Hollow’. Shortly before Christmas I visited The Hollow with Bill in order to acquaint myself with the surrounding area as we were to move our operations there later in January.

We returned to Melbourne on December 24 for our Christmas break. The weather had been mild and there was no perceived bushfire threat that would have required us to stay. I and several others decided to take a scenic route, via Omeo then over Mt Hotham. However, at Bright we had to seek repairs to a broken leaf in a rear spring. After this we had a late arrival in Melbourne, but the spectacular views over Mt Hotham, with snow drifts, made the trip enjoyable. Between Christmas and New Year I had to arrange repairs to the Land Rover, and of course, get to know Iris better. We had a very pleasant week, then I had to return on January 4 and was away till March 27.

Knowing I would be away for three months, I decided to grow a beard. Iris was not at all pleased at the prospect of me returning bearded and said she would prefer it removed before coming home, which I did. It was a very poor imitation of a beard anyway!

On our return to Sunnyside camp, on Sunday January 4, I carried a 16mm movie camera borrowed from my father. We had used it successfully during our tour through northern Australia the previous May. Over the following ten weeks I filmed our activities and have been very thankful to have the record of our experiences which, in recent years, has been transferred to a DVD.

Heavy rain fell the day after our return. I went down to Mitta Mitta to arrange for the hire of a pack horse. We needed one to carry supplies to a remote cattlemen’s hut (Hodgkinson’s Hut) in order for our crews to stay the night on the far side of the wide Snowy Creek (Wills Branch) valley, it being too far for our crews to work across and back in one day. Several days later I went down to a farm at Granite Flat with Ray Brash to collect the horse. We had to wait for a long time while it was shod, but finally we got away and I had first ride. Fortunately it was not frisky and we got it back to a stockyard by the side of Snowy Creek for the night.

The following day three of us started to survey up the Mulhauser Spur, intending to camp out while we continued along Middle Ridge and back to Mt Wills. We started at the stockyards where the horse had been left. Ray Brash was packman and went ahead of us leading the horse with the supplies and sleeping gear. It was slow going because of the many large logs lying over the track, which the horse had to traverse. After a while we caught up with Ray, and to our concern we found him feeling poorly and needing to go back. We unpacked the horse and let Ray return, leading the
horses back to the stockyard. We really did not sense how ill he was. We tried to radio our Sunnyside camp to alert them to send a vehicle to pick Ray up at the stockyard, but our radio failed to send a signal. Ray got to the stockyard, corralled the horse, and made his way up the short track to the Omeo Highway and waited. No vehicle passed so he had to spend the night on the roadside, exhausted and ill.

Meanwhile we had continued our traverse along the spur. At the end of the day we returned to the place where our supplies had been dropped and camped the night. Early next morning I was able to get radio contact with Sunnyside and sent news of Ray. Jock immediately drove down the road, found Ray in poor condition and took him to Tallangatta hospital. Another chainman (Phil) took Ray’s place and led the horse back, picked up the gear and dropped them further ahead for our second night’s campout and returned, while we continued our traverse.

On the third day we connected with a traverse we had undertaken around the head of Snowy Creek, across a saddle we called Gerraty’s Gap. Our traverse was now closed, so we were able to walk out. The weather forecast had been for a heat wave, but at midday the clouds came right down and we were in fog. We walked out through the bush, in damp clothing, and unable to see more than 50m in any direction. The next day was wet. I went to Tallangatta and brought Ray back from hospital. He was placed on light duties.

We were now ready to start our strips across the Snowy Creek valley with overnight campouts. A cattleman’s hut, Hodgkinson’s Hut, a very simple structure on Middle Ridge, was well located for these campouts. Phil King rode the packhorse with supplies to this hut, while an assessment party undertook a strip across the valley, returning the following day. However, during the night while at Hodgkinson’s Hut, the horse slipped its tether and though Phil tried to chase it, it got away and made its way through the bush and down the road to its home at Granite Flat.

On the second day as the first party returned, Frank Gerraty and Geoff Dowler and I worked our way across. I took the role of rear-chainman and mapper and also photographed our progress with the movie camera. At Hodgkinson’s Hut that night we learned by radio that our red Dodge truck had broken down (again) and our other vehicle, a Land Rover, was away. So, following our return strip, we had to finish the day by walking about 6 miles along the Omeo Highway.

Next day, another party was scheduled to do a strip across. Because of our lack of transport, I decided I could get them to their starting point 6-7 miles away down the road by having them ride on the bus which passed our door each morning on its way to Tallangatta. Phil King went to Granite Flat to retrieve the horse. The two-day strips across the valley with overnight campouts continued for several days, while Phil packed in the supplies. During this period we worked through a weekend as it was necessary to keep the momentum going while the pack camp was used.
By this time, near the end of January, our work at Sunnyside was now complete and we were ready to transfer camp to The Hollow. This was undertaken over several days, interrupted by heavy rain, which made the steep slope up Bull Hill impassable. A couple of times vehicles had to be pulled up Bull Hill by the bulldozer which was still in the vicinity making tracks for our access into the new area. Settling into our new camp took over a week.

It was an interesting place. A little rusty cattleman’s hut occupied the centre of a grassy clearing, about 50 m diameter, surrounded by snow gums. Eight single tents were set up in a row behind the hut, and a pair of larger tents were coupled together at one end of the clearing for use as a kitchen and mess, with oven, refrigerator, tables and chairs, etc. A nearby spring was enlarged by the bulldozer to form a small dam from which we were able to bucket our water. The peak of Mt Bogong, to the southwest, was an imposing sight, and to its right, in the distant west, we could see the profile of Mt Buffalo.

Each day we managed to have at least one party in the field, but a lot of our time seemed to be used up with taking vehicles to Tallangatta for repair or doing our own maintenance. Field parties would often have to walk home at the end of a day due to lack of transport.
In order to run strips across the Bogong Branch of Snowy Creek I decided we should use Madison’s Hut on Middle Ridge in the same way as we had used Hodgkinson’s Hut. I sent Phil King on the horse around the head of Snowy Creek to reconnoitre the hut but when he did not return by 5.30 pm I decided to go looking for him, which involved first going towards Mt Bogong. After a fruitless hour of hard walking I decided to return. As it was getting dark I found it difficult to follow the centre of the ridge, as it changed direction a number of times, and each time I found myself going downhill off the ridge. Eventually I stumbled back to the camp, very thirsty. After downing three mugs of tea I realised I must be salt-deficient, so added a couple of teaspoons of salt to the next mug full, which quenched my thirst. Actually, my walk was unnecessary as Phil had arrived back in camp soon after I left and we had passed without seeing each other.

A few days later I rear-chained for a party which ran a strip across the steep and rocky valley of the Bogong Branch. At one point I identified an alpine Podocarpus. After a long day we got to the other side (Middle Ridge) in thick mist at 5.15 pm, and found Madison’s Hut by 6.15. Phil King arrived with the horse and gear at 6.30, he having come via the Mulhauser Spur. Next day we did the return strip, 20 chains apart, and Phil went back with the horse. The horse continued to be used as we needed to do further campouts on the Mulhauser Spur to assess some of the areas in the Bogong Branch and also into the Big River.

One fine Sunday Frank Gerraty and I walked up to the summit of Mt Bogong from where the views were very spectacular.
By the end of February our numbers started to decline as several of the group were relocated to other projects. By mid-March our assessment work in the vicinity of The Hollow had finished and our camp was dismantled, although we still had some altitude measurements to finalise along Middle Ridge.

At about this time I removed my beard. It wasn’t very bushy, in fact the opposite, and no one would have been impressed, so I was glad to be rid of it. At any rate I now knew that I was incapable of producing a vigorous growth.

Before we could start our final tasks we were called to a bushfire near Granite Peak. We had a long walk to get to it, including a ford crossing of the Mitta Mitta River. We spent two nights out, and had to cut fire trails and deal with some burning edges, but light rain fell and it proved to be a rather quiet fire.

Our final campouts started on March 20, when four of us walked up the Mulhauser Spur, and established our camp near the junction of that spur and Middle Ridge. We spent several days checking heights of various prominent features. Fortunately the weather was good, as nights were getting colder. The campout was a pleasant experience. After five days all our fieldwork had been completed and we returned to Mitta Mitta, very dirty, staying at a boarding house, and enjoying a long hot shower. A few administrative duties remained, and finally we returned to Melbourne on Friday March 27.

**Assessment Camp near Bullengarook**

It was a welcome change to be home, but not for long! On Easter Saturday, April 4, I drove to Creswick and Ballarat for Athol and Joy Hodgson’s wedding. Then the following Wednesday I went to stay with Trevor and Pat Arthur at Dimboola for a week. Back in the office I was told I was to take charge of a winter assessment in the eastern part of the Wombat Forest in the Trentham District. We were to be accommodated at the Commission’s camp in the forest near Bullengarook, starting on Monday April 27.

The conditions were very different from those of my previous jobs. We shared the camp with a number of District employees engaged on upgrading the network of roads through the forest. There was a large mess hut with an employed cook, so we had no need to prepare our own food. We were accommodated in small one- or two-man huts. However, the camp was closed down over weekends as the employees went home, so we also returned to Melbourne, or other places, each weekend, which we didn’t mind at all.

Those who started with me were: Bill Clifford, Eric Bachelard, David Anderson – foresters who had been juniors in my senior year at VSF. Also, Geoff Dowler and Phil King were chainmen who had been with me at Glen Wills. Later, Frank Gerraty and Chris Collin joined us.
Although the forest was along the Dividing Range, it was very easy to work in, as slopes were very gentle and much of it almost flat. The forest consisted mostly of messmate regrowth of varying ages, as it had been extensively cut over in the past. The northern slopes of the forest contained extensive areas of poorly-drained sites, forested with swamp gum, which formed the headwaters of the Campaspe River. The undergrowth was generally light, though in one part there was a dense growth of Hakea needlebush which slowed our progress. With the onset of winter I found the area to be particularly prone to cold south-west winds, and I remember a number of days in the forest feeling rather frozen.

The mapping component of our work was less important than in previous jobs as good maps of the forest already existed. However, we had to map sufficiently well to position our assessment strips. We were able to put three parties into the field each day, even though some were with two men rather than three.

Although the camp was closed each weekend, we were only given permission to use our Commission Land Rovers to travel to and from Melbourne every second weekend. (One might
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wonder what we were supposed to do on alternate weekends). We decided we would buy an old car – the one chosen being a 1927 Packard sedan, purchased from a Malvern car yard by Eric and Dave. The car served us quite well, providing our transport to Melbourne every second weekend for one penny per mile each. On the other weekends Bill took it to Creswick. The only drama we had was when a back wheel fell off shortly after leaving camp one day on our way to town. We were able to reattach it and proceed on our way. At the end of the job Bill bought our share of the car.

Frank Gerraty’s inclusion in our group was mutually appreciated, as his parents lived in Woodend and it was a very short trip home for him each weekend. He was also fortunate during the latter part of our work when we worked in the Cobaw Block of forest, north of Mt Macedon. We had to pass through Woodend to get to Cobaw, so Frank stayed home overnight and we picked him up as we passed through each morning.

The 1927 Packard and its owners.

Leon Pederick, David Anderson, Eric Bachelard, Bill Clifford.

L to R: Frank Gerraty, Chris Collin, Geoff Dowler, David Anderson, Phil King, Eric Bachelard, Bill Clifford, Leon Pederick.
On my weekends in Melbourne I remember Sunday afternoon walks with Iris around the streets of Kew and sometimes on fine afternoons we would go down to Studley Park and the Yarra River. Iris knitted me a patterned sleeveless jumper. She was having a busy year of study in the second year of her Arts degree course.

I played football with the Ashburton Methodists again that winter. One Saturday, I was going for the ball when I was hit on the nose by the hand of an opposing player (unintentionally I hope). It broke the bridge of my nose (there has been a noticeable kink ever since) which bled profusely. I was patched up and played the rest of the game. That evening Iris and I had planned to see a film in town. When I arrived at the parsonage door the Arnolds were most concerned at my appearance, but I was not inclined to miss the outing with Iris. So off we went on the tram. Our seats were close to the front on one side of the Odeon Theatre. The film was ‘The Cruel Sea’, a wartime naval epic. My nose ached throughout and I did not give the film my full attention, but I regarded the night out as successful, as well as memorable.

In our second last week Eric Bachelard was transferred to District work at Nowa Nowa, and Stewart Murray and Bob Orr were added to the group. They had been in army camp doing National Service. We hardly had time to teach them much because our work had been completed and we returned to Melbourne on 14 August.

After a month of office work in Melbourne I took leave to go on a trip around Tasmania on my own, starting Wed September 16. This included three memorable railway rides – the Emu Bay Railway from Burnie to Rosebery, the ‘Wee Georgie Wood’ narrow gauge rail from Farrell Siding to Tullah, and the cog-train from Queenstown to Strahan and return.

I was impressed to see the hydro-electric works at Tarralale when I stayed there for a couple of nights. Apart from the train rides I relied on hitch-hiking with varying success, down to Hobart and Dover, and then up the east coast, eventually to Launceston and Devonport in time for the return to Melbourne in the Taroona across Bass Strait. I think my interest in hitch-hiking was fully satisfied by this experience, though I enjoyed it.

**Assessment Camps in the Otway Ranges**

The next assessment job I directed was in the Otway Ranges, with camps at three locations over the summer of 1953-54. It started on November 23 in the Forrest District when we worked the forest in Smythe’s Creek and Nettle Creek, not a very large area. We were accommodated in a house on Sunnyside Road. Those with me were Bill Clifford, Frank Lloyd and Geoff Dowler, so we were restricted to one work team each day. It gave me a good introduction to the Otways – deep gullies lined with tall blackwoods and tree ferns, and steep slopes covered with mountain ash or messmate, a multitude of shrubby plants forming the undergrowth, and plenty of rainy days.

The Smythe’s Creek area was well forested but in Nettle Creek we came upon an area where a sawmill had operated years before. We were told by a senior forester that Nettle Creek had carried a magnificent forest of tall mountain ash forest “just like a packet of candles”. All we could see on this area was scrub – not one regenerating eucalypt. These observations made me very conscious of the problems of regenerating wet mountain forests in the past, and that new silvicultural treatments would be needed in the future. (I am pleased to note that later during my career in Research I saw my colleagues successfully solve this problem).
During weekends we often went to Apollo Bay for our supplies or to go to the beach. As I said, the area was not large, and we completed the last strip in time to pack up on Christmas Eve and drive to Melbourne for a late dinner.

On return, after New Year 1954, we immediately transferred to a Commission road construction camp on the side of the Great Ocean Road about ten miles beyond Apollo Bay, called Cape Horn (a strange name, for it was nowhere near the sea). A new road was being constructed northwards through the forest to provide a direct link between Apollo Bay and Beech Forest. As at Bullengarook, we were accommodated in small huts and our meals were prepared for us.

On arrival, we found that four Creswick students had also arrived for summer vacation fieldwork and that they were available to help us. They were: Fred Craig, Gary Griffin, Bob Waugh and Hugh Brown. We soon had them helping us with our boundary surveys, including a very scrubby section along Calder Ridge. We put them to work slashing the scrub so that we could get longer lines of sight for our survey. At the end of their first day they were very sore from the exertion, sunburnt, and one of them suffered badly from dogwood itch. Years later, Fred Craig, who had then become my boss, told me that it was a memorable introduction to forest work.

Our areas for assessment were the West Barham River Block and Calder River Block, which was an extension of an area assessed the previous year. We did not have to do the Parker River Block directly to the south of our camp, but we did do a reconnaissance of it and found it to contain many very old, large ash trees, most of which would have been defective for sawmilling. I measured one large tree which was 39.5 feet girth at head height.
One day I was driving down the highway and noticed a side road leading to Glenaire, at the mouth of the Aire River. I found a site which looked an ideal, secluded camping ground with access to the beach, albeit after a long walk. I must have conveyed this to my parents. They were thinking of camping at Apollo Bay during January, but now opted for Glenaire. They arrived at Cape Horn several weeks later, with my sister Patsy, on Sat 23rd. I had the Commission Dodge truck loaded with camping gear and firewood, led them to the Glenaire site and helped them establish their camp and stayed till early Monday morning.

Back at Cape Horn after a couple more days work to complete our task there, we packed and moved up to the Aire Valley Camp in the Aire Valley Plantation, near Beech Forest. This camp, on a bank of the Aire River, next to the bridge and a magnificent small trial planting of Californian redwood, was also a road construction camp. Some of the roads through the Plantation were being upgraded, so we again had huts and a cook. No sooner had we arrived on the Thursday than the rain started and continued all Friday.

No bush work was possible so I took the Dodge truck to Glenaire mid-afternoon on the Friday. It was raining heavily and I had camping gear in the cabin, so I took the truck down the greasy track to where my parents’ tents were placed. This time, Iris had been invited to join us. She had travelled from Geelong by bus and then been picked up by Dad in Apollo Bay. Iris and Patsy
shared a conical tent, my parents and I were in a larger tent with a tarpaulin which also provided space for a gas stove and eating area.

That night was very wet and windy. About 3 am some tent ropes worked loose and portion of the tent collapsed, exposing me to the elements. I immediately got up and re-erected the tent, getting wet in the process, but the rain had got in on some of our things. Dad happened to be at the dry end of the tent. On waking, and realising that something had happened, he called out “Don’t worry, I’m all right, leave it till morning!” We never let him forget that for the rest of his life. The rain continued off and on over the weekend. During the wet times we played Monopoly, and when dry we enjoyed time at the beach.

Monday February 1 was the Australia Day holiday with more rain. I tried to get the Dodge truck back on to the road above but the tyres could not grip the clay surface on the sloping track. It was wet again the next day, so instead of being at Beech Forest for work, I was stuck at Glenaire, not that I minded. By mid-afternoon I walked to a nearby farm house to telephone the Commission’s office at Beech Forest. Two men in a Land Rover made the trip down and pulled the Dodge up the slope to the road above. They also pulled Dad’s Austin A40 out so that he could leave the area when necessary, such as to get Iris to Apollo Bay for her return bus trip to Geelong.

I returned to the Aire Valley camp very early the next morning, ready for work, but productivity was low on account of continuing rain. On the Friday, Murray Paine, my boss in Melbourne, visited us and brought the news that I had missed out on being sponsored by the Commission to attend University. I had hoped for this opportunity and was badly disappointed that I had not been selected.

Late that afternoon I returned to Glenaire in the Dodge truck. Early next morning we packed up camp, then I set off for Beech Forest with the family following in the A40. Having returned the truck and contents, I then joined the family in the A40 for the trip back to Melbourne. I think Dad and Patsy enjoyed their camping holiday at Glenaire, but I am not sure about my Mum.
I had to resolve why I had been overlooked for University sponsorship, so on the Monday morning I sought an interview with Alf Lawrence, the Chairman of the Forests Commission. I was told that the Commission had decided that only three students from my year would be sent to University. Ken Nicholls, who ranked third on academic marks from the final year exams at VSF, was selected to go. That was where “the line was drawn” and even though my total marks were only two less than Ken’s, I would miss out. The only way for me to go to University would be for me to apply for leave of absence and pay my own way.

I was most disappointed to hear this decision. However, although I enjoyed the assessment life I knew that I had to move on and I should undertake the further study. Accordingly, it was not a difficult decision to make. I told Mr Lawrence I would apply for leave of absence to undertake the degree course at my own expense. I then went about making the administrative arrangements and enrolling at the University. My parents were supportive and offered to keep me at home for the duration of the course.

After a week in Melbourne attending to the arrangements and other assessment duties I returned to the Aire Valley camp late on Monday Feb 15, having to change a tyre on a Land Rover on the way. During the following days we experienced more rain and mist with brief forays out to get on with our work. That February was a particularly wet month. The Commission was in trouble with the newly upgraded road through the plantation, as excessive amounts of rock and screenings were required to provide a solid surface. Load after load of road metal would just sink deep into the road surface.

We got out to do our field work whenever possible but were often wet. The area we worked was on both sides of Hall’s Ridge, across to Calder Ridge on the south side and across to the Aire River and to the Wait-a-While Track. One day, one of our parties came upon a herd of wild cattle along the Aire River and were forced to climb small trees by a bull! I remember finding a stand of large myrtle beech trees alongside that river.

One day I drove down the Calder Ridge to pick up a group assessing across from Hall’s Ridge. The track was greasy and then it rained. I became temporarily bogged but got out. At the end of the track I left the Land Rover and walked along the Ridge to the point where I expected my men to finish. Apparently I was wrong and the group finished nearer the vehicle. They then walked up the Ridge and, finding the Land Rover, assumed it had been left there for them, got in and drove back to camp. Meanwhile, I was still out there, and realising that the boys should have finished sometime previously, I walked back and found the Land Rover gone. It was now 6.45 pm. I started to walk. A quarter of an hour later to my relief a Land Rover arrived looking for me. However, on the way back the vehicle slipped on a wet slope and got stuck on a stump. At 9 pm Ray and Bill arrived in the other Land Rover. We managed to get the first vehicle off the stump, but not up the greasy slope, so we left it there and arrived back at camp at 11 pm – time for my evening meal. Next morning also was wet. We arranged for the offending Land Rover to be pulled up the slope by a bulldozer.

Experiences like this have left a lasting impression in my mind of my time in the Aire Valley – a place of frequent drizzle and greasy tracks. The scrub was not as thick as the impression one gets from the road. Although there was plenty of vegetation, the foliage was frequently above head height and provided little impediment to our progress through the forest, except for occasional patches of wire grass and vines like the Wait-a-While. Tiger snakes were not uncommon, but were not encountered as we worked through the forest – they got out of our way. More likely, we would find them on the tracks where they would be sunning themselves.

I packed my few belongings and left for Melbourne on Wed March 10. The next two days were spent tidying my office work. On Monday March 15, 1954, my new life, as a student at the Forestry School, University of Melbourne, began.