

by Dean Turner

When my dad (George Sydney Rayner, born in Kempsey on 4 July 1881) was 12 years old he delivered a steam boiler to Alpine Creek and he got 12 pounds for the whole trip from Wyndham up to there in the school holidays. Tom White, who was then 13, helped him. The two lads had to pay someone to help yoke up the team. They couldn't lift the yokes themselves. The year was 1893 or there around.

Dad was managing 3 sawmills on his own at 16 before he was married at 22.

#### Succession of Ownership of Kelly's Sawmills

Stuart Kelly, James Broadhead and Bill West	about 1900
Cecilia West	1/1/1918
Stuart Kelly and Sydney Brooks	14/3/1924
Stuart Kelly	28/3/1925
Herbert Betts	17/11/1943
Herbert Betts and Ken Chapman	21/7/1949
George Vodicka	20/10/1958
Rayner Bros.	23/7/1960

Many sawmills in those early days, before 1923, were pit sawmills. At Nimmitabel there was one sawmill that had 9 pits going. They would have been cutting more logs than all the other sawmillers around the place because they were cutting bridge timber and big timber. With about 30 Chinamen working they cut enough timber for all the culverts and bridges in the area!

A lot of the sawmillers up here in the Snowy's weren't licence holders, they were just squatters, like my Dad at Berra, he had a licence for a quarter million feet a year and he was cutting 1.5 million. The policeman would come out and measure the logs once a month and he'd ring up before he came and ask when it was alright. So Dad would pick up the logbook before the policeman arrived and add up one page and then save time by multiplying that and just changing the odd figure here and there, nobody seemed to worry in those days.

Up to about 1933 the boiler inspector for the mills travelled from Sydney down the coast by boat with his horse. After landing at Merimbula he would ride his horse all over the south and eventually back to Goulburn where he would catch the train and return with his horse to Sydney.

NB: The paragraphs concerning George Vodicka are mostly inaccurate and I have rectified this in a separate interview with George (yet to be finalised)

George Rayner bought the Adaminaby sawmill with the help of his brothers on 6 September 1962. The Rayners were never in the Adaminaby region before this time, having concentrated their family sawmilling business around Bombala, Nimmitabel, Wyndham and the South Coast before this. "You see, sawmillers had a code of ethics in our day; they haven't got it now! We never infringed on each others bearings. From the convict days on, there was always a boundary where you never encroached on the other man's living. We never took any of their customers, they never took any of ours. If somebody phoned us up from Adaminaby and wanted timber from us at Bombala and Nimmitabel, we would say, oh yes. So we would ring whoever was working out around Adaminaby and ask them to deliver the timber and we would send them the account. If they couldn't deliver it then we'd send our truck and we'd deliver it. We wouldn't dare go into their area nor if somebody wanted to sell us logs out of Yaouk or somewhere, we wouldn't go and buy them".

George Vodicka, a German, bought the Alpine Mill from the Snowy Mountains Authority. The Snowy paid out the debts of the mill in the old town when they shifted the town because the mill was to go under water. Then they called tenders. Vodicka was successful and he shifted the mill a few miles north to New Adaminaby. Vodicka was a workman on the Snowy and had been a joiner in Germany. He now has a motel in Canberra.

George Vodicka came to the Rayners near midnight one night. He wanted cash for the mill, he'd been to Peters in Cooma and they said they weren't interested, so he came out another 20 miles to Nimmitabel. He had some trouble making money out of the mill even though he was doing the right thing. He had been trying to cut timber like they cut it in Germany, quarter sawn for furniture, while his men were used to cutting it on the back. The Rayner's decided overnight that the mill was worth the 5000 pounds he wanted.

George Rayner then moved to Adaminaby and doubled the output of the mill in the first year, tripled it the next year and then "we just got it really going properly and the bloody thing got burnt down!" One Sunday, a bloke came up the road. 'You know,' he said, 'there's a fire started under the sawdust in your mill'. Instead of him going out and turning the bloody waterhose on, the hose was there, he came up here and told me. By the time we went back the fire was halfway through the mill. Hardly anyone in those days insured their mill because the cost of insurance for a sawmill was very high. My dad was burnt out I think about 8 times in his life, mainly in bushfires.

When George started-up at Adaminaby he had the Venables working for him, three men from the Jindabyne mill and local labour (the kids from school) plus a few New Australians. George's father employed aboriginals all his life and they were excellent sawmill hands. George brought four aboriginals to his mill at Adaminaby though people around the little town were not too tolerant and objected to their presence. He still employed them because of their abilities. "We were always accident free in our sawmills. The only way we could do it was to get a kid from school (15 or 16) and break him in ourselves. If we could help it we wouldn't employ anybody who had worked in another mill. They had all been taught to back saw timber and we didn't want that, we wanted quarter sawn timber for furniture and joinery."

We used to cut timber on the quarter rather than on the back like they did down the coast and flog it out for frames. We had roof tiling baton orders and for the furniture trade we also supplied boards cut to 1.5 inch size. Since we were catering for the 1.5 inch preferred by the builders we also convinced the farmers that they should adopt 1.5 inch batons and fence droppers.

The German style of cutting, adopted by Vodicka, was to cut logs into small sections 1.5 or 2 inch using the big breaking-down saws. Instead of getting a recovery of say 72 or 74% out of a log they'd be down to 50% before they started.

George Rayner is currently 65. When he came to Adaminaby he had a free licence to log the whole of the range, Mt Tantangara and all! He logged the Eucumbene Portal in 1960 right down to the water and 'now you wouldn't know we had been there!' "You must consider something that is very important; all the old sawmillers like the Broadheads, the Kellys, the Rayners, the Burkes and the Peters, they were all conservationists. They weren't bloody fools, they weren't greedy for money. It was like owning a farm, you had to take the good times and the bad."

"Most of the early sawmillers were just fiddlers (part time farmers). Many of these people that owned these sawmills here were not sawmillers, that's what was wrong. And they never cut very much, you could go and have a look now where they were for years and have a look at their old stumps. They never cut an area out, they could go back every ten years and re-cut it because they only ever took the best out of it and then they would go back as it grew up and cut the next lot. They would only take a certain sized log and it had to be perfect, about two feet in diameter and 20 metres high."

"The Forestry has always been very strict, we couldn't go where we wanted to. It didn't matter if you were bogged and didn't have logs at the mill and you had to put your men off, they would never let you enter another area outside where you should be at that time. We think they have been good managers. We used to think they were too strict, but really they did a fine job. The foresters were good blokes, some of them would walk 40 miles a day."



We were told to go up logging into Swamp Creek by the Forestry and I said "have fixed up all the arrangements?" and they said oh yes, there's no arrangements to make because nobody has the lease on it. Then later we ran into a leasholder called Ware who had other ideas. This Ware would be related to the Ware that Charlie Brooks talked about.

As we went up into Swamp Creek we took the bulldozer up and started to make the road again over the old Adaminaby bridge across the river at Eucumbene. We found that a lot of the old road had been destroyed. The remains of the old Broadhead/Kelly/West mill were still there and Burgess' gold diggings were on the left as you went up. The old mill site was a mile and a half further up from the diggings.

We eventually came to where the mill in the old town had ceased operations in 1946 or 47 (Butch Ware knows the year accurately). When we came to the end of where they'd bulldozed, the old road ended in a side cutting with a large alpine ash growing at the end. We continued right up the hill another 2.5 miles towards Happy Jacks Plain. We logged along the road for about 18 months and then we went over to Happy Jacks and we logged from there down towards the Portal for another 12 months.

We didn't have timber jacks in our day, we only had the crawler tractors. The rubber tired jacks can pull logs for 3 miles and still make a profit whereas we could only pull a quarter of a mile to profits. After that it became too expensive. We never pulled further than 200 to 300 metres, we just kept pushing the road on.

When I went back into the old logged areas I cut out all the timber. I had a six foot saw on the bottom and a five foot saw on top, and the old mill just had a five foot saw on the bottom so you can understand the difference between what I could do to what they could do. They built all the roads and showed me the way in and actually I got more logs than what they got because it had all grown up. We got the better deal. We just went straight in and followed their knowledge. They blazed the way!

When I first came to Adaminaby it was just axes and saws. They always used the crosscut saw to cut the tree down and used the axe to put a scarf in the front of it. If you had to go up 10 feet or so you did the same thing. Dudley Thorpe and Ron Eccleston were our first local log cutters. Ron Eccleston was scalped at Gang Gang Creek. Luckily I walked on the scene as the flying branch hit him under his helmet. I helped him down to the road, refitted his scalp back into place, stopped a passing SMA utility and headed him off to Cooma District Hospital. My utility was three miles away. He was back at work three weeks later.

Chainsaws came in after the war in about 1946. A salesman came up to Kurrajong Heights in 1946. He had a little chainsaw which was about as big as the small saws now. He just pulled it out of a car and showed it to us. Then he stuck it into a couple of logs and showed us how it would cut and Dad said "I'll have one of those!". It was a P.M., I forget what the PM stood for but it wasn't that important.

In the mill we could handle up to 8 or 9 feet in diameter. We once had a log in Nimmittabel that we split in four and we still couldn't put it through the mill. It was a shining gum.

The biggest log I ever cut at Adaminaby was 7000 feet. The diameter was about 10 feet. Broadhead and Co never touched any of the real big timber, they stuck to trees with a maximum 7 foot girth. Similarly with the mill in the old town, they couldn't handle it.

In winter the work became even harder than it normally was. "When the snow was heavy we would leave Adaminaby before daylight about 5am and we'd be up in the bush by half past 6. We'd have the bulldozer started by 7 or 8 and we'd be left out there and back in town by 9 o'clock and unloading. By then the thaw would be on. In the afternoon you'd leave town about an hour before dark, we'd work the bulldozer all day pulling logs out, and by dark you'd be on your way out of the bush and be home by half past 7 and unload in the dark, to be ready to go again the next morning".

The Rayners always called the ash they logged Alpine Ash as distinct from Mountain Ash which George claims is located up at Cabramurra; "That ash is different timber to what grows out here at Yaouk and other areas on the lower watershed". Alpine Ash is a slower grower than most of the other ash, it's soft to cut but it never shifts or moves (buckles or warps). The ash was used for a lot of ladder timber and for joinery. Silvertop Ash, which was referred to by Keith Kelly, is what grows on top of the Brown Mountain. It's a White Ash; the sort of timber Broadhead milled at the Badja for axe handles as it was more bendable, but hard to saw. The flitches were very springy and it was almost impossible to cut straight long lengths. Hence they cut for boat oars, hammer handles, shovel handles, door frames, etc. "Black Ash grows down the coast and that's a semi-hardwood, but just as you come up to the lookout on the Brown Mountain you'll see some trees there that look like stringybark at the bottom but they've got a real white top. Now they are White Ash, a beautiful bendable hard timber."

The name Alpine Ash evolved mainly because we had white ash at Nimmittabel and called it Mountain Ash. Because this area was in opposition, I think they had to find a way to differentiate their tree so they called it Alpine Ash.

Alpine Ash was cut all year round by the Rayners at Adaminaby, but they always made sure the water was kept on it all the time while it was in the mill yard and if the logs weren't going to be shifted from the bush straight away, the bark would be left on them until it started to come off and then they would be moved and cut up straight away. "If a bushfire went through you would immediately log that area and cut it up straight away before it started to die and crack, because fires kill ash, it doesn't matter what sort of forest it is, it never reshoots. Every time you have a fire through, the Snowgum grows up in it and crowds the ash out."

"In 1908 the Forestry started to cut back all the gum and poison it so the ash could regenerate from seed. They even went to a stage of calling tenders I believe for men with ploughs to go in and plough it and burn so as to make the ash areas bigger, just to stir the soil up to let the ash seeds come up. Then they were going to keep the Snowgums down until the ash grew, but it never eventuated because war came in 1914 so that finished all that. I think Tapp was in the Forestry then. He started planting Alpine Ash down in lower areas where he reckoned that the Snowgums had claimed land. I only read this once in a journal years and years ago".

In the Forestry Journal about 12 or 13 years ago they wrote an article on the alpine ash and about the forester J.P. Mc Nally who planted an alpine ash tree just past the Portal turnoff in 1925 to test its suitability for more widespread planting at lower altitudes. The tree didn't grow well because he planted it on the south side of the hill in a frosty area and adjacent to a swamp which ash doesn't like. I suppose that was the ultimate test for the tree.

"However, not all the stories you read are reliable. I once read a story written by the manager of Alan Taylor's sawmills on the north coast, on the big timber jinkers - the one's with the big arches and timber wheels - and how they loaded them. This was only a few years back in the Timber Journal. He said they carried a five ton block-and-tackle around, found a forking limb in a tree and lifted the log up to put it up in the arches on the jinker. Now imagine a bullocky with a five ton block-and-tackle, to lift a bloody five ton end of a fifteen ton log, climbing up a tree. They did it so simply without any of that. All they did was dig two holes for the jinker wheels to go down then the back jinker was backed over the end of the log. As they pulled out, of course, the log was off the ground".

The Rayners sold out all their sawmills, Adaminaby included, to Tableland Timbers in 1972. George asked his two brothers to let him keep the Adaminaby mill but they were tired of the business and decided all was to be sold. Two pine trees and a willow are all that are left to mark the final site of the Bolaro Alpine Sawmill at Adaminaby.

When the Rayner's sold out they had about a quarter of a million dollars in bad debts accumulated over about 50 years. "Most of the builders in the Cooma District had 3 to 6 months credit, they would have owed us 3 to 4 houses each and that had gone on since our father's day. Strange enough, not one farmer owed us anything. It was all builders and the fencing contractors in Canberra, they were the worst ones. A couple of years ago there were 8 or 10 of these fellows talking on the telly, when the building trade went bad in Canberra. I recognised a few of them and sons with the same name, they were all broke 20 bloody years ago and here they were complaining about times being bad. I'll bet they still owed the sawmiller for their last six or nine months of timber!"