

Talk by George Rayner at Kelly's Mill  
on the Snowy Mountains Highway

15th March 1990

Introduced by Graham Scully.

(Unfortunately the sound quality of the narrative on this tape is very poor, obviously recorded under bad conditions, background noise and indistinct voice making it very difficult to transcribe)

.....water wheel driven saw mill, the idea of these little sawmills is, because they had very poor teams in this area, and they weren't really sawmills they were farm machinery. They run sheep and they run cattle and they run horses and for a bit of cash flow I suppose they thought sawmilling wasn't a bad thing. The only market they had was the Kiandra, Nine Mile and up here, and of course they were a pretty poor market and they didn't... the whole setup was that they wanted to cut some timber, but they didn't want to cut a lot of timber because they couldn't get rid of it. They couldn't cart it to Cooma, the train was just coming to Cooma of course in those days and the road to Cooma was atrocious from here, so they more or less just supplied a very small local output in the market. And it wasn't until just about the beginning of the last war that they really decided that Alpine Ash was good timber and most of it went into the tunnels where they tunnelled into to do that.....

.....and most of these people were, they were all family and the ones that worked there.....I would say that a bullock team consisted of six bullocks, the horse team consisted of two or three horses, they didn't have any wagons or proper logging jinkers, such as they had in Adaminaby area or Bombala, down the coast and they were very, very poor sawmillers. They only cut out little patches of Ash they didn't interfere with the bush at all, in fact when I came up here to log, I was going to go into virgin areas that they hadn't logged, but when I went and looked where they'd logged I decided that the best place to log was where they'd found all the easy patches, so I logged all over their areas where they'd previously logged. And these are where they were sawmilling at Adaminaby that I thought they were very modern and sophisticated, I went back and relogged where they logged, and they hadn't taken a quarter of what was actually there. They hadn't taken any of the big logs, the big timber at all, because they couldn't handle it, they couldn't pull the logs and if they did pull the logs down they couldn't cut them up. This little steam engine here of course, now that one that was probably about nine horsepower or ten horsepower, so you can imagine them cutting logs with circular saws, it would drive the sawbench alright, but somehow.....use the old.....and they were all

done with big flywheels once the steam engine got going they had the shafts across the mill with belts, they had the shafts loaded up with flywheels, so that once you got the big ..... turning up and down .....you'd probably find the sawmill owner, he'd have to go up at daylight and start putting the logs through because it wouldn't drive the sawbench and the.... here. In that way, the sawdust they made, they didn't wash it like we did in those places, we always put the sawmill over the creek and all the sawdust was washed in the creek. We had mostly made a timber dam and you'd just pull a couple of boards out in the morning and halfway through the day and that would clean the whole sawmill out underneath, all the sawdust and the waste would wash down the creek.

But here they were without..... it wouldn't be just an ordinary sized wheelbarrow it would be about a mankiller if you saw it today. They dug the pits in under the sawbenches and under the frame saw and they shovelled the sawdust out from the frame saw, they shovelled it out up on top and wheeled it away.

Even if you had ventured into their sawmills in those days, instead of having good big heavy belts they would have had old secondhand leather belts, there's nothing wrong with the good leather belts, but most of them they couldn't afford to have anything decent and instead of having a dozen saws for the sawbench, they probably had two with a couple of cracks in them, and how they didn't get killed nobody ever knew. But they would use them and they were very good engineers some of them, it was nothing to see them sometimes when.....on the inside there was a plate because it had a crack in it, and that was quite common. I've seen my own Dad do it with a big six pitch saw - and the saws of course, a circular saw, when it starts to cut the timber the teeth get hot for the first three inches in towards the saw, and they didn't have ball races for the spindles, they had metal bearings, gun metal bearings, so that the bearing warmed up during the day, which meant that the centre of the centre saw of the circular saw warmed up so that the first thing you had to do of a morning was let it run for a quarter of an hour to warm the bearing up and warm the teeth up, but then the saw had to be hammetted and when you picked the circular saw up, it had to just wobble. You know, really just be really loose, but when it warmed up, of course, it tightened up you'd often see them grab a piece of timber and jam in the side of the saw to keep it hot enough up here because of the cold climate, down the coast it would be warm enough to keep itself warm, but when you've got a really bad, cold day up here you'd see them, every now and again, jam a piece of timber in to warm the saw up to keep the tension. Then they hammered the saws from the centre out to pull it out, then the Saw Doc, he'd had a anvil, most of these old fellows they would have used a blacksmith's anvil, but they would have had to have a proper hammer to pull

the teeth out, to pull the metal out.

When you see a circular saw in these sawmills, you'd think someone had got in with a big hammer and bashed it all over where they sometimes they'd get a bump on them and they'd have to knock that bump and the.... usually if you went to buy secondhand saws from a sawmill somewhere, and the more bumps it had on it from the hammer, you knew that was piece of good metal, and so you bought all those with the hammer marks on them. You knew if it didn't have a lot of hammer marks it wasn't worth while buying!

Then the big saws, the others, you could get a frame saw, some frame saws were twelve feet across and they had seven saws up and down and then you'd get one with three saws, four saws.....they'd be about as wide as that, like across cut saw, about as wide as that and about a quarter of an inch thick. But after years and years of being used, some of them wouldn't be as wide as that, and they'd be thin in the middle where they'd worn, but they were still cutting straight!

The small logs they were cutting here about that round, well you've got to understand, when you take a piece off the side of it like they do in the modern sawmill that piece of timber goes round in a circle like that see, and the piece thats left it goes back, so that instead of just doing a straight cut, with your crown line???? and that you'd have a slight angle, a bend in it, otherwise the middle of the saw would be red hot all the time. Thats why you see them with a tap on, soon's they start to do it, used to have a tap on it, but now they've got so much power they just BRRRRRRROOOM straight through and it doesn't have time to warm it, like in my sawmilling days it would probably take me a quarter of an hour to cut a log, thirty feet long, to do the first cut on it. Once I got it turned over and a piece off the side it was easy then, but that first cut where you had the two saws going, we'd, would have somebody throwing water on the top one and the pipe on the bottom one with the full blast of water on it all the time. So the sawdust was wet, made it had to burn, hard to get rid of and hard for the elevators to take out and it would all add up. But now they've got tons of power its all going out dry and definitely simpler.

They all had their problems, but they also had to overcome them. I'd say with the timber then when the first piece came off, like with the Alpine Ash, the idea then was to cut that spring back out of the timber so that you had to have a man who knew what he was doing all the time. He was the benchman, and the benchman was the main one in the sawmill and you always paid him and he had the best house and his wife was given privileges and if he took a day off you didn't say anything to him, but anybody else did you sacked him!

The other thing was that with labour, you never employed anybody from a farm or off the DMR or off the Shire, you always got a kid from school of fourteen and he was brought into the sawmill. The first thing he was given was to wheel the sawdust out, that was his job and boil the billy at smoko and for lunchtime and keep everybody supplied with what they wanted and do all the errands. The boss would always take him under his wing for the first year and frighten him a lot! You know if he walked round in front of the saw, he might pick up a piece of bark and hit him on the back or on the face or on the arm or up the backside or something, and say "Now you don't do that!" or let a piece of timber come back on the saw and let the sawdust rush into his face hard or something, and it made him very conscious of saws, so consequently he never had any accidents.

We had about sixty to eighty men working for us all our lives, and apart from my Grandfather being blown up with a steam engine and my Father badly injured and a few of us killed.....(Laughter).....we never had anybody cut off fingers or anything like that.

Well that was a silly thing you know, my Grandfather was an engineer. Well that was down at Myrtle Creek the other side of Wyndham and Grandfather was there and he was an engineer and he always liked to work in his workshop he had a lathe there and if you look up his old diaries, his diary had in it -

George sawing, Len drawing, myself lengthening the lathe....

This went on for day after day so he was in his workshop he was lengthening his lathe, making it bigger or something. But that was the time he got blown up. My Dad was on the main sawbench, he was only about sixteen and he went out to the boiler and he couldn't see any water in the tube in the water gauge each side of it. And he went over and he said to his father "Eh"! he said, "The boiler's out of water ." and he'd told the men to pull the fire out of it, his father came back around and said "Put that fire back in, we've got to cut bloody timber, we're not cutting air!" And Dad said "But there isn't any water in it!" "Oh its just below the gauge!" and he walked around and turned the injector on and up she went and the boiler was about from here over to the tree long and I suppose seven feet high, it blew the end out of the boiler and it went on the first bounce about a quarter of a mile and it hit the ground and next bounce it went about an eighth of a mile I suppose. It did they three things, and today you can still see the holes in the ground in the paddock where the boiler landed. So that was the end of that sawmill!

They found, I think about eighteen pieces of it, he was working at the front with the boiler, he was working where the

boiler blew out. Took the whole mill shed, part of the mill shed landed on my father's back, put him in bed for seven months but he lived to be eighty nine.

(End of tape)

Transcribed by Pauline Downing  
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