



An early chapter from a life in forestry

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Paper presented at
WA 2029: A shared journey
17-19 November 2004

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By Roger Underwood

A young man starting out on the journey of a life in forestry in the late 1950s faced two big challenges.

The first of these was that nobody, including usually the young man himself, knew anything about forestry. From the viewpoint of one's education and life experience, it was virgin territory. At school, we had learned nothing about the history of forest use and management in Australia or the importance of the forest industries and the way they were managed. We were not even taught to identify the different native trees that grew all around us. On the contrary we had been taught to admire the pioneer settlers who had bravely "cleared the bush". The heroes of bush poetry and literature in those days were stockmen, squatters and shearers, not foresters or timber workers. Furthermore, few West Australians in those days regarded the forest as a place to take a holiday, or to go camping or bushwalking. Recreation meant the coast, swimming, fishing, boating or just lazing on a beach. The bush meant work.

Right up to the end of my high school years, I had not known what I wanted to do after school. The family culture pointed me towards going to university and becoming a scientist or perhaps a teacher, but my own inclinations were to work outdoors and in the country.

Just at the end of my final year at school, my father drew my attention to an advertisement in the paper calling for applications for a forestry scholarship, to be awarded by the State government. I asked my father what forestry was all about, and I always remember his reply. "It is a noble profession," he said, "with long and honorable traditions." He went on to sketch the sort of work a forester did. My father knew all this because he had worked with foresters in the 1930s when he had been a research officer with the Department of Agriculture investigating nutritional problems, and the research he was doing with sheep and cattle overlapped into problems foresters were having growing pines at that time.

So I applied for the scholarship, and when the results came out, there were two successful candidates: my eventual life-long friend Frank Batini, and me. The scholarship would pay my way for four years of study at the University of WA and the Australian Forestry School in Canberra, plus I would be offered a job with the WA Forests Department on graduation. It seemed to me at the time that it was a very good deal. Only years later I realised how lucky I had

been, because almost by chance, I fell into a profession I loved and which has challenged me throughout my life.

Which brings me to the second great challenge faced by a young forester just starting out on his life's journey, as I was now doing. This was looking after yourself in the remote and isolated forestry settlements and timber towns deep in the forest country of the South West. One of the conditions attached to the scholarship was that we had to work in the bush for the Forests Department during all of our university vacations. This meant living in single men's camps, and batching. The new arrangements started immediately after the awarding of the scholarship. So before my first day at University as a forestry student, and only a couple of months after my 17th birthday, I was instructed to travel to Dwellingup and join a fire gang and work there over the summer until university commenced. In a long-departed sign of the times, I was offered a "rail warrant" so I could travel to Dwellingup by train. On arrival I reported to the office where they pointed me in the direction of the single men's camp, across the yard beyond the vehicle bays, and down behind the sawmill. The camp comprised two rows of tiny wooden huts and a primitive ablution block.

I had never looked after myself in my entire life up until that moment, and I had been given no training in the essential life-skills involved. When it came to cooking and housework at home, this had been done mostly by my mother, with help from my father and two elder sisters. My grandfather had taught me to make johnny cake (a sort of fried damper, eaten with Golden Syrup) and toffee, and I could make toast and open tins, but that was about it.

To my shame, I have to admit that on my first night in the single men's camp at Dwellingup, I had to go to the next door hut and ask the occupant for his advice on how to boil potatoes. These were in a box of provisions my mother had packed for me. The man in the next door hut gave me the recipe, and on that first night of batching I (eventually) had quite a fair repast: fried sausages, boiled potatoes and a tin of pineapple.

This bloke next door was very good to me over the succeeding weeks. He was the first person to teach me the elements of cookery. He was some sort of remittance man, and unlike the other residents of the single men's camp, he was beautifully spoken and well-educated. Each evening after a day's hard work in the bush or the sawmill, he would come home, have a hot bath, change and then cook a substantial meal, like a roast dinner or a stew, the aroma of which would drift tantalisingly across to my hut, to mingle there with the aroma of boiled potatoes and fried sausages.

This phase of my batching career had some notable disasters. A low point was the night I decided that fried rice would be very good, put on the frying pan and heated up the dripping, and then tipped in the rice straight out of the packet. It browned up quite nicely, but you would have needed teeth like the rock crushers at the State Battery at Leonora to make a meal of it.

My other weakness was the cut lunch or "crib" as it was universally known in the forestry world. For weeks at a time I would take the same crib out to the bush every day: a packet of Granita biscuits, a packet of Kraft cheese and a tin of sardines. This would do me for morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea.

A great advance in my batching career came when my mother gave me her old copy of The CWA Cookbook, and I found to my amazement that if I followed the instructions, I could actually make quite a decent meal. The principal difficulty was never having the ingredients for a promising recipe, and there were ingredients I had never heard of, or thought were the same thing, like baking powder and baking soda. I remember once going into the store at Dwellingup and asking the man behind the counter for one egg, which I needed for something I was planning for tea that night. He looked at me with keen interest and asked: "To eat here, or take away?"

Summer work for forestry gangs in the jarrah forest in the 1950s consisted largely of firefighting. Very little prescribed burning had been carried out for the previous 30 years, and the bush mostly carried huge fuel loads. This meant that small fires quickly became large fires, even under mild weather conditions. And since fires were always starting in the forest, thanks to wood-burning steam locomotives, lightning strikes, escapes from farmers burning off and arsonists, we were kept very busy.

There were 5 permanent forestry gangs at Dwellingup in those days, and each consisted of 6 men and was under the control of a tough overseer, often a returned soldier. Our overseer was Bob Mylum, a little man, but one who truly met the description of being "a ball of muscle." He was a skillful bushman and in addition had an astonishing repertoire of colourful expressions, jokes and yarns, most of them extremely filthy. Over several weeks of listening to him telling these stories at morning and afternoon smoko, and over our lunchtime crib, I never heard him once repeat himself.

On my second day on the job we were dispatched to a bushfire in jarrah forest somewhere way east of Dwellingup. The fire had been started by the steam locomotive going out from the Banksiadale Mill for a rake of logs. The late 1950s were the twilight of the steam age in the jarrah forest – elsewhere the first diesel log trucks were taking over, but Banksiadale was a Railways Department mill, and they stuck with trains well beyond the point at which it

was economic. The locomotives were wood-burners and they were the perfect mobile incendiary machine, churning out a cocktail of steam and sparks as they puffed through the bush. Apart from the way they started bushfires, I loved them: the distant wail of the steam whistle through the forest, the chug and beat of the engine, and the drift of steam and woodsmoke trailing down the line.

It was blazing midsummer, that day of my first bushfire, but the potential catastrophe was minimised by the fact that the strip of bush bordering the railway line was regularly burned, and carried low fuels. Reaching the fire, the gang fell into what I came later to appreciate was a well-practised routine. While we unloaded our tools and set up the HF radio, the overseer made a reconnaissance. He then reported to HQ, while the rest of us started in with packsprays and heavy fire rakes, making a firebreak along the edge of the fire. I soon learned the discipline. Each man played a role as we moved steadily along the fire edge, dowsing the flames with water and cutting a narrow firebreak through the leaves and litter. Every few minutes, one of us would be instructed to drop back to check for flare-ups or hopovers. Being the novice, I was also the one detailed to boil the billy and make tea every couple of hours, and to listen out to the radio schedule on the hour. By mid-afternoon we had contained the fire to a few acres.

But just as we stood back to mop the collective brow, there came a great puffing, clanking and whistling around the curve in the railway line. The locomotive, with a full rake of logs, was approaching on its return journey to the mill. As it drew near, the driver shut off the steam and the engine coasted past. From the cab, a grubby arm and two fingers appeared, making an unmistakably derisive gesture. My mates were not immune to this provocation. It was clear that over the years they had fought many a forest fire started by this very man and his infernal machine! Downing tools and running over to the line, they shouted abuse at the engine driver and fireman. The latter simply grinned, and then fired a telling parting shot. As steam was applied and the train gathered speed he jerked his grimy thumb back down the line and yelled "There's another one back there!"

There was too, and we had to deal with that one as well and it took until well after midnight to get it under control. Another gang was sent out to help us, but we still had to do the whole job that night, and without any machinery. Our gang truck was a 3-ton Austin with a small water tank and pump on the back, but the pump had no motor and we had to take turns operating it by hand. A long stint on the hand pump felt a bit like being in an oarsman in a Roman slave galley.

I eventually arrived back at my hut in the Single Men's Camp well after midnight. It was the first of a great many times over the years ahead when I was to come home from firefighting, my clothes reeking of woodsmoke, with red eyes and a grimy face, and so tired I could hardly stand up. These times included the fateful summer of 1960/61 which I spent as a fire lookoutman on the Gardner Tree and in a fire gang at Pemberton. This was the year of the Dwellingup, Crowea and Karridale fires, the toughest and most dangerous times of my life, still burnt deep into my memory.

In 1963, by then having finished my forestry degree and been appointed as a Forest Officer, the lowest rung of the professional staff, I spent time in various forest districts and single men's camps around the South West, including Mundaring Weir, Harvey and Dwellingup. It was while I was at Harvey that I witnessed one of the most revolting bits of batching I had ever seen. My mate Frank Batini was living in one of the other huts, and one evening I popped around for a chat just as he was cooking his tea. He was grilling chops in his electric toaster. Hot fat dripped from the machine onto the table, and thick smoke, shot through with darts of flame, coiled up to the roof of his hut. Nearby, on a cord from a double-adaptor, he had the contents of a tin of peas bubbling in his electric kettle. I felt that here was a man from whom even I could learn nothing of the niceties of the culinary art.

Late in 1963 I was transferred to Pemberton, where I worked as a junior forester under the direction of that great man Barney White. Forestry work in the karri forest in those days was still in its pioneering phase, with large areas of the southern forests still completely inaccessible and largely unmapped. My work included surveying and building new roads, running assessment lines to measure and map the forest, establishing trial plots of karri seedlings and other eucalypts and reviewing private forest for possible acquisition by the department. Barney was the Divisional Forest Officer, the forester in charge of a large establishment of field staff and forest workmen, four forestry settlements, and responsible for all the fire protection in the region and the regeneration of the areas cutover by the mills. Barney was one of the great influences on my life – a true gentleman, a great forester and mentor, a friend, and a superb raconteur. I was frequently invited to dinner in the old DFO house next to the office with Barney and his charming and sophisticated wife Jenny, and their clutch of full-on children. They were evenings of gargantuan meals and laughter.

Being a single officer, I lived in the small hut under a spreading cork oak tree, just down the hill from the office, known as the SOQ, or Single Officer's Quarters. The hut was three metres by four. There was just room for a wood stove, a bed, a table and chair and a door and a window. I had a big blue heeler cattle dog at the time by the name of Cassius, who accompanied me

everywhere, and things used to get quite cramped in the hut when both of us were inside at the same time. The hut was small, but not as small as the one Barney had lived in once – it was so cramped, he told me, he had to open the window to put on his jacket.

For a while I did all my own cooking on the hut's wood stove, but it wasn't much fun, especially as I often used to get home late and in the dark, having missed the shops, and I had nothing as sophisticated as a fridge or microwave oven. It seemed to rain every evening in those days at Pemberton, and dry wood for the stove was always at a premium. I fell into the bad habit of adopting the classical Australian bushman's meal of an earlier era: tinned food and bread and jam.

One day one of the blokes in the forestry gang said to me: "Why don't you eat at the Boarding House? You can get a three course meal there for 2/6 and they'll also give you breakfast and cut you a crib." So that night I headed down to McCall's Boarding House, in the main street of town, just across from the mill.

Boarding houses largely filled the niche now occupied by the motel, or the B&B. Almost every large country town had a boarding house when I was a young man. They provided an alternative to living at the pub, and a "home-away-from-home" for itinerant businessmen, travelling salesmen, schoolteachers, bank johnnies and various single men and women. The speciality of the boarding house was a cheap room and cheap meals, but they also had a certain ambience about them, depending on the personality of the landlady. I heard about a boarding house at Manjimup in which conversation at the dinner table was forbidden, but the ones I knew were clean, happy, bustling places with friendly staff and opportunities for fun and games.

Back in 1964 Pemberton had two large boarding houses, and they did a thriving business. They were great rambling old weatherboard and iron-roofed buildings, with a huge kitchen and dining room, a rabbit warren of single rooms and a unique backyard ecosystem of old stables, giant woodheaps, rusty implements and puddled yards around which dwelt a variety of cats, dogs, chooks, rats and snakes which lived off food scraps and each other.

After only one night's test run at the boarding house, I re-arranged my life completely. Henceforth I continued to live in the SOQ, but I had my evening meal and breakfast each day at the boarding house, and they made me a crib, which I picked up after breakfast. All of this cost me less than five shillings (50 cents) a day.

At McCall's Boarding House, you entered by stepping straight off the front verandah into the dining room. This was a large low-ceilinged room, poorly lit, and made darker by polished jarrah flooring and oiled dado walls. Beyond was the kitchen with its great cooking table and massive wood-fired range. After I had insinuated myself with the cook (who was also the landlady), I was always allowed to eat my breakfast in the kitchen, which I loved to do on winter mornings. I would eat my bacon and eggs in a glorious atmosphere of warmth from the wood stove amid the heavy aromas of hot fat, bacon and coffee, and look through the window at the rain sheeting down across the distant hills. The cook, a jolly, buxom Englishwoman with mighty arms and curly hair, would chatter away cheerfully to me, as she bustled about preparing the breakfasts for the other guests, who mostly came in later than me.

On my first night I was immediately introduced to the rules of the place. The first was that meals were served "on the dot". On the dot, you were expected to be seated, and to have your knife and fork poised; the kitchen door would swing open and out would come the young ladies employed as waitresses, neatly uniformed, bearing steaming plates of food to the tables.

The second rule involved seating arrangements. There were four large tables in the dining room, and you couldn't just sit where you liked. You were allocated to a table by the management, and there was a rigid hierarchy. The table nearest the door (known as "Table One") was for casuals – tourists, for example, or people not known to the staff who just popped in off the street for a meal. I started there. Table Two was for the travelling salesmen, who came in on their circuits of the bush, and would turn up like clockwork on the third Monday of the month or whatever, as they moved around the country towns soliciting buyers for their wares from the local shopkeepers.

After a night or two as a casual, I graduated to Table Three. This was closest to the kitchen, and was reserved for local regulars, mostly old retired mill workers and one or two bachelor shopkeepers. Table Three also boasted the presence of Old Paddy, the boarding house's odd job man. Old Paddy had spent most of his lifetime chopping wood for the kitchen and the hot water system. He was a tireless worker. Over many decades of chopping from dawn to dusk, he had got well ahead of the demand for wood, and his pile of chopped mill ends had developed into a pyramid that the Pharo Rameses II would not have been sorry to call his own. Another Table Three regular was Alec Evans, who for many years had been in charge of building the bush railway lines that ran out from the mill. Alec had a fund of wonderful bush yarns, and would entertain me for hours, often sitting on well after dinner was over.

But it was to Table Four that I aspired. Here were the young people, mostly schoolteachers, but also a bank johnny and a fisheries officer. They were all about my age, and every night I would watch from afar as they skylarked, roared with laughter, flirted, chatted, and generally had a grand time. One young lady caught my eye immediately, with her flashing brown eyes and charming manner, and my interest in moving tables intensified. I put in to the management for the first available transfer to Table Four. This I eventually achieved, but not until the start of the new school year a few months later.

Many of the residents complained that boarding house food was monotonous and unenterprising. It was, but I still enjoyed it, and I never complained. Almost every night we had a roast dinner, with beef, pork or a joint of hogget smothered in rich gravy, roast potatoes and pumpkin, parsnip or carrot and peas or beans, plus a choice of sweets. The sweets were usually trifle or steamed pudding, both served topped by viscous yellow custard, but occasionally there would be a treat and a massive tin of fruit salad would be opened for us, which would be served with fresh cream.

Breakfast was invariably bacon and eggs. Perhaps there were other options, but I never felt the need to inquire. They were cooked in a huge black frying pan, containing about 10 centimetres of bubbling fat, into which the eggs and the bacon slices would be plunged. When breakfast was over, the frying pan would be simply set aside and the fat would congeal, ready for re-heating to boiling point the next day. I don't know about the healthiness of all this, but I do know that nothing has ever tasted as good as those deep fried eggs and bacon, eaten in a warm kitchen on a winter morning, as a watery sun pierced the morning mist.

The cribs prepared for me at the boarding house were very good. I would have my thermos filled with sugared black tea, and be handed a package with several sandwiches, usually with an interesting and tasty filling like cheese and pickled onions or cold meat and chutney, plus a slab of cake. Like my boss Barney White, with whom I was often in the bush those days, I could never wait to get into it. By some sort of unstated mutual agreement, Barney and I both used to like to sit down for lunch before eleven in the morning. We shared a concern that if we didn't get lunch out of the way, something might come up, and we might miss the opportunity. If Barney was driving, he was expert at spotting a congenial spot for our daily picnic, usually by a pool in the river, and under the shade of a nice sheoak.

Just before Christmas in my first year at Pemberton, school broke up and all the teachers suddenly departed. A gloomy silence fell over the dining room at the boarding house, broken only by the old-man-eating noises made by Paddy, who would wolf down his meals as if every one was his last. Paddy

also had an unattractive way of buttering three slices of bread at once by laying them up his left arm, and applying the butter with his right with a sweeping flourish, rather like a concert violinist completing the last bars of a Beethoven sonata.

Luckily I didn't have time to become depressed by this new situation. At this moment Barney asked me to transfer for the summer down to Northcliffe to take charge of the next phase of the survey and construction of the Northcliffe-Walpole Road (now known as the Chesapeake Road). This involved quite complex surveying work, and supervision of construction, which included building a quite major bridge over the Gardner River. I was also assigned to a fascinating job involving the assessment of old abandoned Group Settlement farms, which the Department was interested in purchasing and returning to State forest.

In those days, Northcliffe was a very tiny and a rather primitive town, especially compared with the bustling metropolis of Pemberton. It had a pub, but no boarding house. So moving to Northcliffe meant a return to batching, which I undertook in the single officer's quarters, an iron-roofed weatherboard hut squatting under a pine tree at the back of the forestry depot.

However, living at Northcliffe had its advantages. The hut was the best I ever lived in, with two rooms, pine lining, electric light, an excellent wood stove. The nights were cold, but Cassius could be relied upon to hop up onto my bed as soon as the heat from the kitchen stove died away, and he would curl around my feet, and we would keep each other warm. Nor did I lack for entertainment. This took the form of the local Forester Jim Loverock, who used to invite himself to tea with me when his wife locked him out for coming home late from the pub, which was surprisingly often. Jim would eat a hearty meal, borrow a cigarette, and settle down to regale me with stories from his young days in the bush, or his war experiences in 2/11th Battalion in the Middle East or up in "the Islands". This was better than television.

But this was all part of the adventure, something to store up for a memoir to a Journey's Conference in 40 years time. I loved the people I met at Northcliffe. They were invariably work-hardened, weather-beaten and unsophisticated, but friendly, humorous and cheerful and I was always made to feel at home, especially when I visited the little farms on the old Group Settlement blocks. I also loved the surrounding forest, and even the farming landscape, which still had a raw pioneering feel about it in the early 1960s. Few of the original farms had managed yet to get rid of their ring-barked trees, and these still stood in serried ranks, from fence to fence.

Most of the following year was spent working in and around Pemberton, and I fell back into the routine of living in my hut under the cork oak, learning my trade as a forester under Barney White's mentorship, fighting bushfires and taking my meals at the boarding house. And I wasn't just going there for the food. The young schoolteacher with the flashing brown eyes had returned to Pemberton after the summer vacation, and she turned out to be intelligent and beautiful, and to share my love of the bush and my sense of values and humour.

A great chemistry was at work, and in no time love blossomed. It was not too long before certain agreements were reached.

In 1965 I took up a research post at the University of Washington in Seattle, USA, where I had been accepted to study for a Masters degree in forestry. In 1966, Ellen joined me there, we were married on Easter Saturday, and another of life's great journeys began. I am pleased to report that we are still sharing adventures, love, laughter and tears, 39 years later.

Fate had two more tricks to play. When we came back to Perth in late 1967 and I rejoined the Forests Department, I was appointed Forester in Charge at Mundaring Weir. Unfortunately there was no house available for us, and since it was a condition of the job that you lived in the forestry settlement, Ellen and I moved into the Single Officer's Quarters. Like so many others all over the South West, this was a tiny hut crouching beneath the trees at the back of the depot. Indeed it was the same hut I had batched in back in early 1963, and it was primitive in the extreme, with an ancient wood stove whose oven did not work, zero furnishing and no hot water. Luckily for me, Ellen had spent her early childhood on a Group Settlement farm near Manjimup, and she was undismayed by inconvenience or hard work.

The second twist of fate came towards the end of 1968 when my phone rang one morning and it was the Regional Superintendent, John Meachem. "Roger," he said, "we want you to move south and take up a new position as the Officer in Charge of one of our most important areas. There will be a removal van at your place in a week, and the destination is Pemberton."

So, with a new baby, a new dog, and little else, we moved back to Pemberton, shifting into the very house in which my great friends Barney and Jenny White had lived at the time when I was a single man camping down the road under the cork oak tree. I didn't mind. I loved Pemberton, and I loved the karri forest, and it seemed to me that the book of my life's journey had fallen open to a new chapter and it would be better yet than any other. For I was no longer just an itinerant forester posted from one single man's camp to

another, but a family taking on new challenges together, and this added value to everything else.

It was raining when we reached Pemberton late on an August evening in 1968. A chill wind with a whiff of icy grapeshot swept up the valley from the One Mile Brook, and the dark trees around the house dripped and swished. The house was bitterly cold, the stove was out, there was no hot water, and the woodheap was drenched and poorly stocked.

"I wonder if the boarding house is still open," I said. We didn't check, but simply laughed, and Ellen decided we could cope if we took things one step at a time, starting with me lighting a fire in the lounge and another in the kitchen stove, which I did. Mind you, I can remember thinking to myself at the time that a great frying pan full of bacon and eggs, hot from the range in the boarding house kitchen, and maybe followed by a roast dinner and steamed pudding, would have gone down rather well.

This story is taken from Roger Underwood's recently published book "The Tree Climber". Copies of the book are available by contacting him on (08) 93394055 or yorkgum@git.com.au.