

Oral History Group: A Subcommittee of  
The Bunbury Historical Society

an interview with  
Bob Wight of the  
Ferguson Valley  
7th November, 1985

Some details of:

- The Timber Industry: Approximately 1900-1985
- Forestry Management: Approximately 1935-1985
- 1950 Bush Fire Burekup-Wellington and
- Reminiscences of a Craftsman: A Broadaxeman

Conducted by  
Valerie Spence.

Verbatim Transcript.

Introduction

This tape is of Bob W<sup>1</sup>ight, a farmer in the Ferguson Valley. He was interviewed because he has worked in the timber industry for approximately 50 years. He is fire officer for the Ferguson region and a skilled broad axeman who has built bridges for the Main Roads Department in W.A. The tape was made in the kitchen of Bob's home on the 7th of November, 1985, by Valerie Spence. With the tape is an article about Bob from "The Worsley Alumina" News of 1982.

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1. F.K. Crowley, Australia's Western Third; A History of Western Australia, (London: Macmillan, 1960), was read as a background to the timber industry by the interviewer. A Bibliography in the library revealed that books on the timber industry in W.A. were rare and were not specific to the Wellington/Ferguson area.

(Pause)

VS Where were you born Bob?

BW 26th Febuary, 1916 at Wellington Mills.

VS ~~What is your full name?~~ (Pause)

BW Robert William White<sup>(sic)</sup> (pause).

VS What's the full name of your father Bob?

BW John Robert.

VS Where and when was he born?

BW In Victoria, at Echuca in 1896, the 26th of May is his birthday.

VS Did your father have a lot of education?

BW No, unfortunately those times there wasn't very much available.

VS So he left school quite early? What did your father do?

BW First job he had he was started as a yard man in the timber industry and his father was the yard boss them days.

VS That would be your grandfather?

BW When he eventually died my father took over as yard foreman<sup>+1</sup> for Millars and stayed there until they closed in 1929.

VS It was in the Wellington area that your father worked in the timber industry was it?

BW Yes the big mill at Wellington.

VS And for what period of time did your father work there?

BW I would say from 1910-1929.

VS So he would have been there when....oh but they didn't have the Group Settlements here did they? 2.

1. Bob said that the town of Wellington<sup>g</sup> closed in 1927, so the above date is possibly only approximate.

2. Here means the Wellington area.

- BW No there was no Group Settlement in this district at all.
- VS No ....till 1929 he worked there?
- BW He worked there ...yes.
- VS And he was the foreman-he just oversaw what everyone else did?
- BW And done all the tally work.Hundreds and thousands of pieces of timber and they had to keep a record of every piece.There was always two rail trips a day to Dardanup with all the sawn timber and they had to account for every piece of timber had to be accounted for.
- VS Yes,he wasn't actually out in the field then?
- BW Oh yes he'd go round the timber stacks ,oh they might make em 25-30 yards long,12-14 feet high...to season them and put little 1/2 and 1 inch strips in between to let air go through them as they seasoned,because in them days they didn't have kilns like they've got now,they'd leave them stacked for about 5 years then as they seasoned they'd just send them away.And they cut a lot of big timber,a lot of big timber went from here to India.It was anything up to 25ft.long,16x8,18x20,all big stuff, that used to go away all to India.
- VS What type of timber was it mainly?
- BW All jarrah and for a while a bit of black butt, but they, there was some trouble caused,I that they thought that the blackbutt would outdo the jarrah and they eventually stopped it altogether cutting blackbutt.
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There used to be a lot of it stacked here on our property at....the timber they condemned.

VS Can you remember any of your father's reminiscences about the timber industry?

BW There was a lot of funny jokes of course.

VS That's okay(laughter).

BW There was always one thing when they first came here they hut here at first and my grandfather, and the chap that lived up on your property used to carry a board home every night to build their house-on their shoulders.

VS Did they?

BW Yes always.

VS How far did they walk then?

BW Over 2 mile-can recall a mile over the hill over here straight up over the hill and if one bloke was down at the gate there and he saw the other one coming at that gate he wouldn't wait-they'd keep walking, they had to run to catch one another to talk on the way to work. They used to start at a quarter past 7 them days, rain, hail or shine.

VS Going back to what your father actually did in the timber industry. He wouldn't have been chopping down timber then?

BW No, he was just in the yard handling all the sawn products all the time-tallying it up and sorting it out and loading railway trucks because everything was railway trucks, there was no motor vehicles them days.

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- VS Moving on to your grandfather-what did he do-he was also in the timber industry?
- BW He came from Victoria for Millars and they worked at Denmark for a while until Wellington got started around 1900 sometime -I'm not too sure-give a year either way and he was sent here then as yard foreman for Millars
- VS He again was foreman and he didn't actually chop down the wood or anything like that?
- BW No he was only just the foreman of the yard all the time -all the sawn products.
- VS And he came over from Victoria-what year did he come?
- BW Can you remember or did anyone tell you?
- BW It must have been somewhere before the 1900's because they were here in the 1900's working at Wellington because my uncle Jim was born at Denmark and my uncle Bill was born at Wellington.
- VS And he came with Millars-they brought him over,did they?
- BW They sent him over,they sent a lot of men over because Mr.Muir was sent over as bush boss to look after all the horses and that,the horse teams and the fallers and he took up the property just over the hill there and my grandfather took this one up in 1906.
- VS ~~See~~.Yes.How did he come over then-did they come over land or?
- BW No I fancy....I'm not certain of it I fancy that they all came round by boat.
- VS Did he ever regret leaving Victoria?
- BW No they thought that this was God's own country.
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VS Did they? You were quite young when your grandfather died?

BW Just three years old....I can just remember them carting him away. It's one of those things that's always stuck in my mind.

VS Oh yes.How did they cart him away?

BW He had some stomach trouble-they reckon they could have saved him nowadays but four or five chaps carried him away on one of those canvas ~~safety things they used to have.~~

VS This was after he died was it?

BW No this was before he died. He died in the Bunbury hospital. They operated on him but he was too far gone...could probably have been burst appendicitis I don't know.But I'll always remember them carrying him out. There was about 6 chaps altogether and they'd all take turns hanging on to this canvas stretcher.

VS When did he die?what year-I mean how old was he?

BW Oh he was quite young-he was only about 46 or 48.

VS That's rather sad isn't it?

Can you remember anything about your grandmother?

BW Grandmother on me father's side I can't remember nothing because she was dead long before my parents ever even married.

VS What about your mother?

BW My mother was Annie Florence that was her name.She was born in

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Queensland at Rockhampton. Her father was lost at sea when she was only I think eighteen months old. I'm not certain of that but round about that age. And her mother is the one person I could never agree with. She was a very hard English person. You can imagine everything had to be spot on.

VS A traditional English lady.

BW A real hard English task master. Everything had to be right and I just couldn't ....well I was only young.

VS This was your mother's mother.

BW Yes old Granny Jackson and I was very cheeky I suppose them days I know that in 1927 she sent a Bible from England and that's the only thing that survived the fire and she sent that for me to mend my ways.

VS Oh and do you think that it was successful Bob?

BW I don't think so because I've never opened it yet.

(Laughter)

VS Did your mother have a good level of education?

BW No, unfortunatly not, she was just... She came here as a housewife.

VS She would have been what age?

BW She was a bit older than me dad. Women are never very keen to tell you their ages so I never found out.. I could have

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1. The interviewer means 'what age was your mother?' when she came to the Wellington area.



found out I suppose but it never entered my head them days because she's been dead since what's Tony ? 30..she's been dead about 36-38 years.

VS Did she ever say anything about women having the vote or women being at home?

BW No I think she had too much to do rearing a family with the things they had them days, they had no washing machines, no vacuum cleaners, no things, no fridges. I think they were always flat out rearing the family, kids and they only had very small wages.

VS You came from a big family did you Bob?

BW NO there is only two boys and one girl and myself ...only the four of us.

VS Well I think that's quite a big family for these days.

BW Well I suppose for them days it was and then when you look back at Noggurup there was three houses alongside one another, they had twelve, one had fourteen, one had sixteen.

VS Oh!

BW So that's pretty small. 1.

VS And did your mother have the children at home or did she go in-  
to hospital?

BW No she went to hospital.

VS Which hospital did she go into?

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1. The interviewer is referring to the size of Bob's family.

- BW Well I was born at Wellington, Jack was born in Perth because my father was away at the war at that time, and Barbara and Arthur were both born at St. Rocks which used to be down there where the silos is.
- VS What was that name?
- BW St. Rocks-that's what I think they called it St. Rocks... somewhere down there any way.
- VS I didn't know there was a hospital down there.
- BW Somewhere down there there was but I wouldn't know....
- VS And your grandmother-oh you have mentioned her that you didn't get on with her.
- BW I wouldn't like to say this what I used to tell her(pause)
- VS We won't say anymore about that. Did you find out the full name of your brother's and sister's ,and where and when born? Well you have told me where and when born.
- BW John Edward, Arthur Norman and Barbara Isobel (pause).
- VS What are your earliest memories of childhood?
- BW I think the first thing I can remember is them taking grandfather away when I was only three. That's the first thing
- VS That sort of thing sticks in your mind.
- BW Stuck in my mind ever since.
- VS Describe your family home to me when you were a little boy.
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BW Well it was only a timber house, all timber, there was no asbestos (extraneous comment: that's just a tractor going cutting hay) them days. All the walls were roughly timbered and then they used to have hessian and paper. Pretty paper they used to glue on it.

VS What happened when it rained.

BW They had iron roof and they had weather boards outside.

VS Big eaves?

BW Big eaves - all timber structure all together - timber was cheap I suppose. They got most of it for nothing anyway.

VS Can you remember anything special about family life when you were young?

BW Oh I think that times were hard you know, there was no money for people and you were flat out to - you get a family of three well there was only three of us because Arthur wasn't born till I left school. It was a lot to rear a family and try and buy a place. They were paying off the farm I suppose and things weren't all the best and I know we used to have to walk everywhere. There was no vehicles them days.

VS No (pause). You travelled either by walking or by horse?

BW Yes horse and sulky.

VS Yes.

EW

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BW Yes I remember we used to go out in the sulky sometimes for a drive on a Sunday. Go down to some neighbours down the road or something of that nature.

Generally speaking it was old paddy hooks, on your feet.

(Laughter)

VS In our initial interview we spoke about your school-days, perhaps you'd like to tell us about that again Bob?

BW Firstly we had to walk all the time, we wouldn't have had half a dozen rides in all my school days, I don't think but well we used to play the wag quite a lot.

VS It was more fun in the bush was it?

BW Oh definitely-just grab a couple of dogs and go chasing -there used to be little things called Tamars in the bush, chase them or see a mob of blokes working in the timber industry, we'd go and talk to them, all day, do anything to....another time, there'd be some family from here they used to all go to school with us and the boys would run in all the bushes and everything and get wet in the wintertime and we got to school I was too wet for going home-the girls all come home dry-we never woke up to that.

VS I believe that you used to go on kangaroo shoots. Did you do that on a wagging day?

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- BW Yes that was the greatest idea-we'd come home,it was too wet to go to school so we'd grab a gun and a dog and off we'd go in the bush and put the day in the bush.We were wet as shags.
- VS You used to light fires didn't you?
- BW In the summertime we always.....
- VS To flush out the kangaroos?
- BW No to get good feed for the wintertime.We'd see an area, we'd think oh well its February-we'll go out and chuck a match in,it might burn 300 hundred acres,or 400 hundred acres,next winter that's where all the good feed was and that's where we'd catch our kangaroos.
- VS So quite early on you were doing some forestry management?
- BW Well we were villains I'll admit that but that was our way of getting around things-it was always done.
- VS Yes and you went to primary school?
- BW Well the school it doesn't compare with today's primary school because there was first and second infants I think or first and second year and then they sometimes had a girl,an elder girl out of probably the sixth or seventh class might look after them most of the day,but it was only just one teacher and half the time-well I know the first two or three teachers were only chaps that got wounded in the war and the government
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sort of gave them a job as school teachers-they wouldn't have got too far today of course but anyway I suppose they did the best they could. My time I can only remember four going on with their further education from here.

VS Where did they go onto from here?

BW Well they had to be-I know there was the mill manager, and the mill boss and a couple of-one farmer over here that had a bit of financial standing, they sent their children to board in Bunbury to go to high school but our people and all of other people, they couldn't do that sort of thing.

VS No they couldn't afford it?

BW No way, they were only on ~~£~~2:50 a week.

VS When did education finish for most people in this area?

BW Well there was very few went past fourteen. I left at thirteen but most kids went till the year they turned fourteen and hunted around to get a job a week milking cows. A lot of them sort wended away further to other mills and as the mill closed down, they a lot of the senior men they got jobs at say Mornington, or Treesville or some other Millar's mills, they tried their best to rehabilitate them but anybody had any property here it was no good them going to those mills.

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VS What was the school like?

BW Well it was just one big room-oh there was two schools actually alongside one another and for the earlier day before my time they used to have em both full but in my time they was a suppose 30-33 kids was the most that ever was there. But there was just one big room as big as this house probably with..... Actually they were lined with tongue and groove boards which would have been magnificent today if you could have had it. But it got burnt down in the 1950 fire. It was beautiful timber inside them.

VS Yes we'll talk about the fire a bit later on Bob.

BW There was no.....anything fancy, no painting or anything of that nature.

VS And there was just one teac her?'

BW Most of the time there was one, sometimes he did have one girl. I suppose you would call her an assistant teacher for a few years but she was only one of the local girls that didn't seem to want to go away and get a job but she just sort of assisted the teacher most of the time. It was rafferty rules all the time at the school.

VS Well she probably had quite a bit to handle?

BW Well she had no hope of handling us.

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VS What was this about goannas?

BW Well the day that we caught the big goanna and took all the books out and put in the desk and hid the books, she was there for half an hour before she had the, there was just a table like this with a pull out drawer and the old goanna came out and he wiped everything off the table as he went, and say there was 30 kids in the room and the big teacher-big English bloke, six foot tall and all and scrambling he was pushing kids off to get up on the table himself. And this goanna doing 100 mile and hour laps around the hall.

VS It was a big bob tail?

BW No it was a big race horse-he'd be four foot long, and none of us-well he had no trouble finding out who done it because the four blokes that done it were all splitting their sides laughing and everyone else was crying (laughter). So we got on the verge of being expelled for that but it was worth it. Another day we put the dinner time in catching these big red bull ants-catching them in tins and letting them all go on the floor. (Laughter)

VS So you didn't get any work done in the afternoons?

BW No it was just Rafferty rules. This old teacher would go home

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some time after lunch-walk to his house -the house was only about 50 yards away and we had one way of watching, when he came out he always left one guard to watch-there was one picture hanging on the wall and you could see the reflection of him coming out of his kitchen door. As soon as we walked out we'd all be all over ourselves but the rest of the time we'd be pelting chalk, writing on them with ink, throwing ink on someone, Rafferty rules there's no doubt about it, no discipline.

VS Moving on to recreation-when you were young-and when you were old -was there very much entertainment in this area?

BW Not a great lot, it was too costly for you to go to anything for the money earned, see you had to-there was no sport, originally. In the earlier days they used to have a bit but we used to make our play, hockey occasionally, we only, the way we got playing that we would go and get suckers off a tree where the sucker come out we'd make our own hockey sticks. Oh I suppose if you'd have had some money and chased after the sport there was always sport at Dardanup and those places but on five bob a week the young blokes would sooner go out in the bush shooting.

VS Where did you meet your wife?

BW Unfortunately. Oh I was playing cricket at Donnybrook-she's a Donnybrook girl and the funny thing-I knew her father very well, twelve years before. He worked in the timber industry.

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I used to see him out here when I was carting sleepers, I used to go and have a yarn to him.

VS Where were you married?

BW In Donnybrook, in 1947.

VS How many children have you?

BW Two boys and one girl.

VS And they are grown up aren't they?

BW All off my hands now! The grand kids they're worse.

VS I'd like to mowe on to your work in the timber industry now. Which area did you work in?

BW Well mainly in the bush all the time, I've never. Oh I did do about 3 years in the saw mill but didn't like the noise of the saws and everything else. I'd sooner be out in the bush falling. So I started sleeper cutting when I was about 14, helping the old man, he was building bridges for that time I know I was cutting sleepers when the Trump won the Melbourne Cup, that must have been 1937.

VS How did you cut the sleepers?

BW Well you'd fall the tree and cut off the lengths whatever they used to cut- 6 ft., 6, 7 fts., 8 fts., 6 and 9mfts.

VS This is all by hand, saw.

BW And you'd saw with a cross cut saw you'd saw the log off in lengths and split em up in hammer and wedges and then do it with the axes.

VS What period of time were you working (in the timber industry)

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1. Parentheses indicates what was meant but not said.

BW Well off and on since I was-I left school at just over 13. I was thirteen in the February and I left in the March to help the old chap on one of these bridges. From then on mainly all of my life I have been either cutting sleepers or bridges or falling and cutting poles, and piles and then I'd have probably six months off on farm jobs then back to it again. It seems something that draws you back to it, you keep going back to it. You always say well that's the last but you'll still go back.

VS You must have seen a lot of changes in mechanisation?

BW Well I think that's the greatest thing I ever saw was the change from horse teams in the bush to tractors.

VS And you did tell me that your father worked with bullocks?

BW My <sup>1.</sup>grandfather, the wife's father, he was a bullock team (Driver): He came from Victoria here to Lyall's mill to drive a bullock team. Seen bullock teams working here but not a great lot. They were never greatly used in the Wellington district. There was one team in the Collie district for a while but bullocks were used mainly down in Pemberton, Manjimup area where it is very wet, horses don't like wet work, with ground soft horses will get very nervous but a bullock will keep walking quietly pulling a load, up to his belly

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1. Parentheses meant but not said.



in mud but if a horse goes that far in the mud he starts to panic, well he can't pull if he is panicking. All our life as school kids on a Saturday morning we'd hop on a couple of horses we had here, old broken down things, and ride out to the bush to watch the horse teams, that was something that had to be seen to be believed.

VS They hauled the logs did they?

BW Hauled the logs from the bush where the men fell them, they had to pull them to the rail line. The railway line-one of them went past here-and they, horses they used to have to pull them sometimes up to a mile, the log probably weighing 12 or 10 tons. They'd only have 8 to 10 horses, sometimes they might have a special lot of big logs-they'd put 12 horses in. They're massive horses mind you. But some of the drivers if they'd been on today's racket they'd have been shot, terrible some of the cruel things I could tell you, but I wouldn't spoil the.....

VS They were actually quite cruel to the horses?

BW Oh some of them were the biggest mongrels of men that ever lived. There was one chap I saw once that he was telling us kids that, course he was always prepared to give you advice, he said that no man driving a horse should carry anything but a fly swat, because if you hit one horse, you upset the

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other one. He said if your horse needed a bit of a stir up you then take him out of the team and take him way down the bush and give him a belting and then bring him back but he said you should never hit a horse in front of another because you would only upset the lot. And we've seen it plenty of times. So when the tractors came in and took the horses - well you can't belt a tractor with a stick, so I think it was the greatest thing in the world when tractors came to take the job off horses.

VS About what time did that happen?

BW Oh they were here just before the war - the first tractor I saw just before the war - Bunnings had it out here.

VS During the war was there a shortage in labour and materials?

BW Yes there was a shortage of fallers for the mills and that because all the young fallers were gone and Millars or any of the saw mills had a job to get men for the bush. I know round about 41/42 they man-powered a lot of men for different jobs - they were nearly all old and something wrong with them.

VS After the war did you notice any difference in the timber industry?

BW Oh well I think generally speaking you've seen a slight decline in it ever since the peak periods, I mean where in

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VS says when

1. According to Bob Wright, the peak period for the timber industry was 1919 when 3 or 4 hundred men were employed in the industry.

our days when we were kids, the mill used to saw what you would call about a hundred load a day, now there's very few mills when we were working that's doing more than 10 or 12 a day, so they're all little small mills mainly say 4 or 5 men jobs. At Wellington they must have had 3 or 4 hundred men at one stage. Well they had a baker's shop and a butcher's shop, big grocery store and post office.

VS Yes I was going to ask you to describe the mill town.

BW Oh it was baker's shop-~~everything~~ was there.

VS Just before we move on to the mill town-what about the wages you received?

BW Well I have heard them say that anyone that was getting about 2 pound a day was one of the high paid men of the job. When I first started it was nearly up to 3 pound I think.

VS Did you have any trade unions then.

BW Well I don't remember ever coming in contact with them-they may have been but I think they might have been round the bigger mills, I don't think they were ever around here. Oh obviously they had some interest in it but not very often, I don't remember ever. I can't remember ever a strike in the industry, I know there was a big strike before I can remember

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was 6 months because there was one old Italian chap worked here, he went up and saw the boss when the strike first started, the boss was named Herbert Davis, this old (?<sup>1</sup>Sigami), he said look here he says "How long is this strike last Mr. Davis?" Well he said "YOU go Joe you've got plenty of time to get there and back" and JOe was back before it started - he was away 6 months. (Laughter).

VS Actually that brings me on to a point about the kind of people who worked in the timber industry? because there were a lot of displaced persons weren't there after the war?

BW I don't think - there has been quite a few Italians in the timber industry, in my time. They eventually came and got into the sleeper cutting and that sort of thing, but there's been a few fallers but I don't think in my recollection that there was nay new Australian type blokes that would out gun the real good old hard blokes that have been I mean, I suppose every generation depreciated from one to the next. The next line that came along wasn't as good as the gang that had gone before. Ther<sup>e</sup>'s been some marvellous men here with the axes and things all of them I don't remember seeing very, very few that wasn't hard drinkers.

VS Ah yes.

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1. It was rather difficult to hear what Bob was saying here.



- BW In the timber industry it was always the same, they work hard, long hours, but soon as they got home at night they were into it-weekends they never knew they were on this earth-how they worked Monday morning, I don't know.
- VS Yes, Millars sort of took account of this didn't they?
- BW Yes I think all mills but by jove you had to be there, on the spot at quarter past 7, if you weren't then goodbye you get a job somewhere else. There was none of this stopping home for having a sickey, there was no sick days them days.
- VS No!
- BW And they'd walk to Dardanup, Monday night to get a reviver-  
15 mile.
- VS They must have been fairly desperate.
- BW Walking never worried them (pause).
- VS Didn't Millars put on a train?
- BW Yes Millars had a train in the earlier days they used to run a train every Saturday-they'd knock off at 12 o'clock and I think that it used to leave about 1.

END OF SIDE ONE



START OF SIDE TWO

VS We were talking about the train to Dardanup on Saturday afternoons Bob.

BW Well the train used to go down to Dardanup and they'd the gang would wait there the chaps would all go to the pub and play up and do what they liked but they used to blow a whistle at about 10 to 4 and those that weren't on the train by 4 o'clock-look they stayed behind and walked home.

VS How far was that then?

BW 13 mile to Wellington there well they didn't worry, but they used to-the beer...them days...5 dozen in a wooden box and you'd see them all just before ten to four grabbing their cartons or boxes of grog or perhaps three of them would all dub in and buy a box, they'd cart her over and put her on the train and that would do them all Saturday night and Sunday. They'd be back at work Monday morning might be pretty sick but---have a headache or something but it wouldn't matter because the boss would be watching them, keep them going flat about all day, especially the navy gang. One of the worst blokes was they used to have a bit of cotton or wool tied round their head like that and the tail would go down the back of the neck, reckon that was the best way to take the sweat, down the back of your neck and down your front.

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Old Irish bloke used to be a bloke named Corbett, he was one of the gangers in the railway line, when putting the line out for the logs all the time and he'd be one of the main ones to go to Dardanup, Saturday on the way home he'd have to walk after he got to Wellington he had to walk four mile back out to his home where he lived-drunk as a monkey, got to about a mile from home, he started yelling out 'Oh, Jesus Kate get the billy on I'm coming home Kate and the old lady would rattle the girls-get on girls and get the tea for Dad. Anyhow he kept on with that for years and he and eventually he died poor old chap-the following Saturday night their own son got on a horse and said he was going to Wellington to see the boys and went down the road a bit and he had a white sheet and he put it round him self and riding up the road "Come on Kate get the kettle on, I'm coming Kate". Oh my God the poor old lady she said "Tom's soul's come back." Poor fellow, she reckoned it was his ghost.

VS A sort of an Irish joke.

BW But what a terrible joke to play on his mother.

VS Yes.

BW But Tom just laughed-it didn't worry him.

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VS Anyway we'll move on again to the mill town. Was it visited by the priest? Was there a church or anything?

BW Yes this same Irish lady that I was just telling you about she used to walk in about once a month I think they used to have the R.C. church. There was an R.C. church on top of the Wellington hill there just past where the double story house on the bottom well just on top of that point there used to be the Roman Catholic church and the Church of England church was just by that big house with the orchard round it, just there. This old lady would walk in on the first Sunday in the month from Mass and then she'd walk home again 4 mile.

VS What about the men working at the mill, did anybody visit them? did the priest visit them?

BW Oh they might-of course they had to drive up from Dardanup or wherever they came. They used to come on horse and sulky, or ride the horse on a saddle. I think that's how they eventually got around. Oh I have seen the priest come up here but not unless there was some special occasion.

VS What kind of houses did they have in the mill town?

BW Oh they were very rough on today's standards, just straight weatherboard and as I said before just lined with hessian and paper. They were comfortable I suppose for those standard

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but they wouldn't have done for today-the unions would never have allowed the same things today I suppose, but this was going back many years ago.

VS There was a hospital wasn't there?

BW Yes the hospital was where that Momon jumpers church is now. That's where the hospital was. The doctor's surgery was on top of the hill here this side, just where you first strike them with the pines there.

VS Did they have any suicides or anything?

BW Oh there was one or two that I can remember of but not to what you seem to hear today-different population too.

VS No but at Mornington I believe that was quite a problem.

BW I can remember two here in my time. There was a few men killed here in my time too.

VS I was thinking of the loneliness of the life.

BW Well I am not too sure. People have different opinions. Sometimes it was women trouble-sometimes it was grog trouble or financial troubles.

VS It was quite a good hospital was it?

BW Oh I don't know how it would go with today's standards. If they wanted to cut your leg off they'd had to send you to Bunbury. For normal things they'd just give you a needle, I suppose, or a couple of pills or something, and said oh you'll be right tomorrow. Mainly for maternity, I should imagine.

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There was the old midwife there as well and the old doctor used to live on top, but I think mainly for maternity and small sickness, I suppose-flu's influenzas and things like that.

VS Any bad accidents at the mill?

BW Oh yes every few years there'd be an accident of some sort. I know a chap got rolled over with a log up here, a bloke named Tonkin. He got squashed and they had to send the train out that night to pick him up. They kept him, they used to have a little building down behind the workshop.

VS That was the mortuary?

BW That was the mortuary. They'd lay them there over night. A bloke got squashed with the rails. Just where the old store was, they used to have a platform around like that at a bit of an angle and one guard there one day went to put the brake on and got caught and just took him along, screwed him all the way down the platform, cut him in half at the other end.

VS Awful.

VS What sort of entertainment was there? Was there a tennis club or dances?

BW There was always a dance around. There was one tennis court up near Wheatman's. Oh people used to play for a while and they'd seem to get sick of it. And there was always a football team in the early days, and when the big mill was going, they

---

had a billiard room as well as the hall. Eventually when the big mill closed down, they took the big hall away and just used the billiard room for a hall which was quite good for standards for those days. We had a lot of fun in them.... If you worked it right you could get a dance every Saturday night. It was either Wellington, Ferguson, Mumbullup, Noggurup somewhere. There was always one.

VS They had visiting bands did they?

BW Mainly it was all volunteer music. Someone would belt a piano and someone would get a kerosene tin or bash it or something like that?

VS Or an old washboard or something like that?

BW Yes they always seemed to have a terrific time.

VS Moving on to your broadaxe work and the bridges. There is a very good article in "The Worsley Alumina News", No 4, August 1982 and I'll be putting it with this tape-if that's okay with you?

BW That's alright -go for your life.

VS But perhaps you'd like to tell us a little about your broadaxe work.

BW Well the broadaxeing I don't know(pause)...<sup>1.</sup>(extaneous-not on tape now) how long its been going or where it was ever invented but it was one of the main bush works in the early days, here, but I suppose since the war there's been no hewn sleepers they've all been sawn sleepers so the hardwork went

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1. I think Bob was looking for a piece of paper here and and he said "not on tape now".

- out of the game but they've still maintained them doing all the bridge work for the Main Roads. Department
- VS They're the bridges that we go over on the main roads are they
- BW Yes that big one at Bridgetown that was the last job I worked on-that one there that big one as you go towards Manjimup-Bridgetown.
- VS What's the advantage of them being broad axed rather than sawn
- BW Well one of the main advantages, they always say that you can broadaxe a piece of timber and put a cup of water on it and it will still be laying there the next day. If you pour it on it will just lay there but if you saw it with a saw and it tears all the fibre of the wood and the water goes straight into it. This is one of the main reasons for the bridges. They always preferred it to be broadaxed.
- VS It would actually last longer then?
- BW Well they so they maintained it does but then again there is the trouble with sawing it is get him to a mill putting him through the sawmill, getting them out again and carting them back to the job whereas it is now they fall the tree, pick it up drop at the bridge and as far as the contractor's concerned supplying the timber he's finished. Two blokes on the broad-axe work for the bridge, you can do all the work that's got to be done in a big bridge say 14 span you can do it in three weeks,
-



BOB WIGHT

VS That's very good isn't it?

BW See some of the bridges are 17-18 span, and 9 or 10 stringers to a span takes a lot of chopping but they still seem to think it is the best way.

VS And you have a special way of getting the timber straight don't you?

BW Well you have got to have a pit which is the way that the log lays you must be sure that you are not too close to the heart, you have got to work it out that you might have to turn the log two or three times, before you get the right angle of it and you drop a spirit level and hold it up and get the chalk line and drop that chalk line so that you make it dead true and as you squaring it all the time you keep a spirit level alongside you and you check it every three or hits you check it to make sure that you are keeping dead spit on. You can do a 35 -40 foot stringer and only be less than a 1/16th of an inch out at the other end, where a saw can't do it because as it gets hotter it rolls.

VS Are there many broadaxe men left in Western Australia?

BW No, unfortunately, well there's one or two probably reckon they can do it but as far as The Main Roads I think they have only

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about two left, so it's like everything else, the old style things are going and modern technology is taking over and probably in some cases it is for the better. (Pause)

I haven't chopped my foot yet but I've been very close a few times.

VS I guess you wear some big strong boots do you?

BW Never worn steel cap boots till I <sup>e</sup>ttled my elbow here about four years ago. Before that I only wore ordinary boots and I never marked them but since then I've done a few damages.

VS You cut your elbow did you?

BW No I turned it inside out-chopping a got a chip caught in the axe and it just went straight back over my head. You can see where they operated down there on it. But I suppose it's nice to see them I still do quite a few mantle pieces and that's for different people for their new houses that they wanted something to look old in them. There is one house over the road here that's got two pieces of timber that's well worth looking at-16 foot long, 16 inches deep and 4 inches wide and they've got them stuck up in the ceiling as feature pieces.

VS Going back to the bridges, the bridges-over what area are these bridges built that you have done?

BW Done from Northam, York right down to the other side of Pemberton,

Northcliffe to Brookton.

VS So it would be a three week job and you'd go off for 3 weeks to do the bridge.

BW That big job there well when you have finished the broad axe work there is always a hell of a lot more to do so you just go on painting, and driving the nails in and spikes in. That big bridge there that I showed you those pictures of.

VS That was the bridge at Quindaning.

BW That took about 4 months altogether. The big one at Bridgetown, think, took nearly 9 months. That's all got a concrete top put on it so that putting the steel and the concrete on took a lot of the time. They reckon that's going to last for a hundred years.

VS I think it will too.

BW There's no moisture can get under it, you see one time the moisture used to ruin half the bridges but now they put sealed tops on like the one you'll have noticed that one at the Coca Cola and there's no water can get down to them so that they are more or less dry all the time and therefore you don't get that rot, in them.

VS Moving on to talking about conservations and econuts and things like that. Perhaps you'd like to talk about the forestry past and present.

BW Well I think myself, well I know I don't agree with all the

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forestry policies, I mean there's some things that I don't like, that's their job to look after it the same as I wouldn't like them to come and tell me how to run my farm but the I'm always in my own opinion that if they'd have been in the same command as they've got now 50 years ago, we'd still have a lot of good forest left, because they simply slaughtered it and wasted it in the early days where now the forestry officers go through and they mark the timber and that timber got to go and its got to be used just don't fall it and leave it there. I can show you a hundred logs in this bush here that have been felled down 50 or 60 years ago that would probably build houses out of them and they're still laying there, just absolute waste, they just got everything that was easy and left everything that was rough or hard to get out, they just leave them. Well its all that good timber just left on the ground.

VS I know you have, you believe that the forestry burn off <sup>1</sup>.....

BW Well we all believe that we burn the right time, well they believe in Spring burning but we don't think it does the flowers any good or the birds. But you can see plenty of places where get in the thickets and scrubs all little birds nesting in October/September! November and they put these huge fires through it-well something has got to go.

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1. The interviewer was going on to say "at the wrong time?"



VS Your method of fire control is nearer to the traditional Aboriginal firestick farming.

BW We burn the same as the old Abo's did. We burn every time it can and.....

VS Your method of using fire would be more like the traditional Aboriginal method of firestick farming-that's the way they used to do it isn't it?

BW Yes that's the way they used to do it, just go round with a the firestick-let her go and that's how we used to do it.

VS It's interesting that you are doing the same method.

BW I suppose that is why we believe that we are on the right track and they are on the wrong one, but they might still be right.

VS But it's a bit of a guidance..... 1.

BW Well it is.

VS You are the fire officer for this area? There was a very bad bush fire here in the fifties.

BW April 14th, 1950. It went through and just cleaned up everything. There was quite a few houses. There must have been 8 or 9 houses in Wellington<sup>2</sup> went we lost our house over here at Lowden, 8 miles away and the fire was from here to there in less than 20 minutes. Well if I remember rightly that about somewhere about 11 o'clock the fire was way the other side of the forestry

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1. Bob has an areal photograph of his bush block in the Ferguson region. This shows how luxuriant the growth is on it which forms a stark contrast to the State forest surrounding it which is quarantined because of dieback. It is this contrast which is being referred to.

2. Later Bob said that 30 houses at Wellington had been destroyed.



settlement and by 2 o'clock everything was black and gone. There was cows burnt everywhere, horses burnt and pigs everything just went like mad. Well there was 14 kangaroos burnt in a heap, on my flat down here and if it catches kangaroos there is not much hope of you getting out of the road.

VS Were any people killed?

BW No, fortunately there was no one but there was some very close shaves.

VS What caused the fire?

BW Well they don't know for sure, it was a fire that was supposed to have been a controlled fire over near Burekup but it was burning around a private property there for about four or five days I believe and some people say that it was burning there for a week but I don't know about that for sure. But it just took the right day and the right wind and they got a strong N.W. wind and it just went mad. Well nobody could get out of the road-it was like those Victorian fires-cause if you got in the road of it you'd go. (Pause)

VS What particularly do you do nowadays as a protection against it happening again?

BW Well the best thing the forestry have done they do burn properties between adjoining all farms, because they've got

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a policy of a five year fuel build up and they have over the last 20 years made sure that it is religiously done which now that there's noway that any of our bush behind us can get that dirty that you are going to get these inferno fires, you see when the 1950 fire come I think that bush had been shut off for something like 20 years. You can imagine the mess that was in the bush and once you got the heat on it well as far as you can see from here any direction you like there wasn't one tree anywhere with a green leaf on it, not one tree for miles-from here to Burekup there wouldn't have been a tree with a green leaf on them(Pause).

VS Well we've got a little bit more tape left Bob, are there any other anecdotes or stories about villains you've known?

BW Oh there's been some terrible men(Bob makes comments which are extraneous:something written down here-here it is)-there were artists and funny boys. There was this old chap that I was telling you about riding the horse with a sheet around him. He was one of the greatest villains that ever lived. There was one old chap lived a bit further on and he was something to do with-he was a lawyer in England and he must have got into some trouble over there. Run out to Australia quick, well his son bought-his son used to be the accountant for Millar's at Mornington. He bought this property up here and this old chap put there more or less to keep him out of mischief I

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think and this Tom Corbett he'd go and put in a day carting firewood for him, stack it for him-all sleeper chips-we used to chop off the sleepers, beautiful wood it is and he'd put it there for him and every pension day-once a fortnight this old chap would walk into Wellington and the train used to get the supplies, every day I think used to leave at 12 noon and come back at 3 o'clock during the week and this old chap go on a ride to Dardanup, he'd get his few groceries if he wanted something down there but it was nearly always some medicine he had to get from the pub of course and he'd be coming home afterwards and this Tom would wait for him to come to his place and he'd go up with him to his house to help carry his bag and he'd get there and his heap of firewood would be burned. This sod would go back during the day and light it and this old fellow would say "Oh there's some damn Ned Kelly villains been here again today," and he had a pet rooster and a pet cat and every time he went out he'd make sure they were put out and away he'd go. One day this Tom walked back and caught the rooster, and caught the cat and dropped them down the chimney and put a wet bag on top of the chimney (laughter) Poor old fellow he came home that night (laughter) the poor old fellow came home that night there was cats and dogs. (laughter)

VS You were telling me about that man who used to.....there was a

---



a bit of cattle rustling and sheep stealing around here?

BW Oh there's always been a bit of that sort of thing going on but nobody was ever pinned down to it.

VS There was one man who had a good way of disguising what he'd got in his bag.

BW Oh this old Sam Irvine he was a sleeper cutter with the wife's old father, and quite a few old chaps—they were camped all through this bush. The forestry allocate them 100 acres and they'd mark out plots for them and you could cut that 10 acres and you could that 10 but they all had to be where they could get water you see. They were only living in tents of course and this old Sam—he'd be one of the toughest men that ever lived he'd come home to his —where you people have this property now—he'd come home there probably Saturday afternoons and do a few jobs around the house and go back to the house on a Sunday and on the way back he'd always take his rifle and shoot a roo or too. Anyhow there was one cocky here used to run his sheep all through that bush and every eight or ten sheep he'd have a little bell on them and you could here these damn sheep wandering through the bush at night time all the time, anyhow this old Sam he was a cunning old sod. He'd shoot a good wether now and again and take it home, and take it to the camp and he'd put him in the bag—the only cooler they had was a big chaff bag and he'd have 2 big

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boomer legs sticking out of the top of the bag(laughter).  
My God he went past and he said"I know old Sam's getting a  
sheep or two of mine but every time I come past he's got  
that damn kangaroo in the bag."If he'd only opened the bag  
he'd have seen the sheep in it.

VS And he never got caught?

BW No he never got caught.I know when as kids when we were young  
he'd give us anything to go and shoot him a couple of crows,  
or a couple of Kookaburra 's.

VS What did he do with them?

BW Cook em and eat em.God he'd eat anything -Ah go on he'd say  
they won't hurt you.Same as if he had a bit of fly blown meat-  
you'd see a kicker that long some time and he'd just get the  
knife and cut him in half(inaudible).He'd say they're not too  
bad-they're young-when they get old and furry they're not too  
good(laughter).

VS Well thanks very much Bob it's been really interesting talking  
to you.

BW It's been a pleasure to do it.

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"Worsley Alumina News", No 4 August 1982.

ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL:

"Worsley Alumina News", No 4 August 1982.

Photograph of Bob Wight working on the bridge at Bridgetown which spans  
the Blackwood River.

A sheet which outlines the time the subjects appear on the tape.



SECRET

ORAL HISTORY GROUP: SUB COMMITTEE OF THE BUNBURY  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

NARRATOR'S NAME: BOB WIGHT Taped on 7/11/85

TAPE NO 1: SIDE A AND B: THE TAPE RUNS FOR APPROXIMATELY 1 HOUR.

TIME

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48-52 Name of father and when and where born

52-55 Education of father

55-56 Father's occupation

56-65 Father's occupation, Grandfather's occupation

65-66 Area in the timber industry in which Bob's father worked

66-67 Period of time father worked there

67-99- About father working in the timber industry

99-105 Reminiscences from father and house building methods

105-114 Father's work with timber

114-117 Transport

117-118 Grandfather's arrival in W.A. in 1900

118-126 Grandfather's occupation

126-130 Time of Grandfather's arrival

132-134 About Millars

134-137 Grandfather's transport over from the Eastern States

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ORAL HISTORY GROUP:SUB COMMITTEE OF THE BUNBURY  
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165-173	Narrator's attitude to religion
173-176	Mother's education
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200-206	Earliest memories of childhood
206-210	Family home
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## THE OLD AND THE NEW

The south-west region will undoubtedly benefit from the influx of new industry and the new technologies and skills which will be learned. But there are still some old skills which can't be bettered - as long as the people and the materials they work with remain.

One of the best examples of this is Bob Wight. Bob has worked for more than 50 years in the south-west forests using little more than a broad axe to build wooden bridges, water tank stands and farm sheds as well as running his own farm in the Ferguson Valley about 30 kilometres from Worsley. Recently he was at the old Worsley Mill working his skill with his broad axe on 25ft Jarrah logs, while Worsley Alumina and Raymond Engineers Staff tackled their more modern technological problems just 10 kilometres up the road.



Talking to Bob is a fascinating journey into the past. "Now that the old skills are dying out people want to know about the broad axe. Years back when bridges were built nobody was much interested. But when we built the bridge over the Blackwood River at Bridgetown 2 years ago, people were always stopping with cameras and asking how it was done," said Bob with a wry smile. "We were like movie stars."

Worsley Alumina has benefitted indirectly from Bob's skills with the broad axe. About 5 years ago he was involved in building the bridge across the Williams River on the Lower Hotham Road which is a much travelled route between mine and refinery.



Bob retired from the Main Roads Department "to get under Mum's feet on the farm" but people keep asking him to build another bridge. He is constructing two private bridges to properties on the Ferguson River at the moment. The skill in wooden bridge building is in cutting the Jarrah logs along a perfectly straight line and fitting the logs to match each other with decking on top. The fit must be exact both longitudinally and laterally otherwise the bridge will wobble. A well constructed bridge will stand for a hundred years and cost about one fifth of the amount for a concrete structure. A broad axe is used because in the hands of a skilled axeman it will follow the grain and actually cut or shave the wood and tend to seal the cut surface. A saw, which tends to rip the surface of the wood, opens the timber to weathering.

Another secret to success is in marking the line to be cut along the log by twanging a blue chalk covered string lined up with a spirit level. The log must then be cut exactly in the middle of the line with the broad axe.

The broad axe has a single blade about 12 inches long with a hickory handle bent outwards "so that you don't lose your knuckles". A straight line must therefore be cut with a bent handle - not any easy task. The only concession that Bob has made to new equipment is a pair of steel-capped safety boots which have a few slice marks on the leading foot. "I never used to wear them," said Bob "but since I turned my elbow inside out I haven't got the strength in my arm to stop it if I feel the axe go."

Change has also come in the way the forest is managed. Standing beside the "King Jarrah" tree a landmark of the Ferguson Valley which Bob estimates to be about 500 years old, he said: "A local mill owner picked out two trees like this about 1910 and told his men never to cut them down, but they came out one Sunday morning and felled the biggest one. It was too late then. You hear a lot of criticism of the Forestry, but I've seen some terrible waste in the bush before they were around."

The old "King Jarrah" tree stands about 43.6 metres (143 ft) tall with a 7.4 metre girth. Looking up he said, "I wouldn't like to cut a straight line along her, she would give me a hell of a backache." A supreme compliment coming from Bob.

Over the years Bob has seen a few changes come to the area with new people moving in and smaller properties being developed as hobby farms. A new lifestyle is coming to the south-west as the benefits from development serve to increase the range of occupations available. But it would be a pity to see the skill of the broad axe disappear.