

BUNBURY ORAL HISTORY GROUP



Verbatim Transcript of Interview

Interviewee:	Mr Robert William Wight
Date of Birth:	26 February 1916
Interviewer :	Valerie Spence
Date of Interview:	7 November 1985
Date of Death:	25 November 2004
Verbatim Transcript:	Valerie Spence
BOHG No:	1985-005
Total Length:	48 mins 19 secs

NOTE TO READER

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This interview is of Bob Wight, a farmer in the Ferguson Valley. He was interviewed because he has worked in the timber industry for approximately fifty years. He is a fire officer for the Ferguson region, and a skilled broad axeman who has built bridges for the Main Roads Department in Western Australia. The interview was conducted in the kitchen of Bob's home on the seventh of November nineteen eighty five, by Valerie Spence

Where were you born Bob?

Twenty-sixth of February nineteen-sixteen [26 February 1916] at Wellington Mills.

What's your full name.

Robert William Wight.

What's the full name of your father Bob ?

John Robert.

Where and when was he born?

In Victoria, at Echuca in eighteen ninety six, the twenty sixth of May is his birthday. [26 May 1896]

"my father was born in Victoria, at Echuca in 1986"

Did your father have a lot of education?

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

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

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

That would be your grandfather?

When he eventually died, my father took over as yard foreman for Millar's in Wellington and stayed there until they closed in nineteen twenty nine. [1929]

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

Yes, the big mill at Wellington.

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

I would say from somewhere about nineteen ten to nineteen twenty nine [1910 – 1929]

So he would have been there when ... oh, but they didn't have the Group Settlement here did they?

No, there was no Group Settlement in this district at all.

No, till nineteen twenty nine he worked there?

He worked there, yes.

And he was the foreman, he just oversaw what everyone else did.

And done all the tally work. There was 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.

Yes, he wasn't actually out in the field then?

Oh yes, he'd go round the timber stacks, or they might make em twenty five – thirty yards long, twelve to fourteen feet high, to season them and put little

half inch by one 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 five 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 twenty five feet long. Sixteen by eight [16x8]. Eighteen by ten [18x10] all big stuff, that used to go away all to India.

What type of timber was it mainly?

All jarrah, and for awhile a bit of black butt, but they, there was some trouble caused I believe they thought that they black butt would outdo the jarrah, and they eventually stopped it altogether cutting black butt, there used to be a lot of it stacked here on our property, the timber they condemned.

Can you remember any of your fathers reminiscences about the timber industry?

There was a lot of funny jokes of course.

That's okay [laughter]

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

Did they?

Yes, always.

How far did they walk then?

Over two miles, two and a quarter mile, they used to walk 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 up one another to talk on the way to work. They used to start at a quarter past seven [7.15am] them days, rain, hail or shine.

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

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.

"my grandfather came from Victoria for Millars"

Moving on to your grand father, what did he do, he was also in the timber industry?

He came from Victoria for Millars and they worked at Denmark for a while until Wellington got started around nineteen hundred [1900] sometime, I'm not too sure, give a year either way, and he was sent here then as yard foreman for Millars.

He again was foreman and he didn't actually chop down the wood or anything like that?

No, he was only just the foreman of the yard, all the time, all the sawn products.

And he came over from Victoria. What year did he come over? Can you remember or did anyone tell you?

It must have been somewhere before the nineteen hundreds, because they were here in nineteen hundred working at Wellington. Because my uncle Jim

was born at Denmark, and my uncle Bill was born at Wellington.

And he came with Millars, they brought him over, did they?

They sent him over, they sent a lot of men over, because Mr. Muir he 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 here, and my grandfather took this one up in nineteen hundred and six [1906].

Yes. How did he come over then, did they come overland or?

No, I fancy, I'm not certain of it, I fancy that they all came round by boat.

Did he ever regret leaving Victoria?

No, they thought this was God's own country.

Did they. You were quite young when your grandfather died?

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

Oh yes. Any why did they cart him away?

He had some stomach trouble, they reckon they would have saved him nowadays, but – four or five chaps carried him away on one of those old canvas safety things they used to have.

This was after he died was it?

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

When did he die then? What year, I mean how old was he rather when?

He was only young, he was only about forty six or forty eight [46 – 48 years].

That's rather sad isn't it. Can you remember anything about your grandmother?

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

What about your mother?

My mother was Annie Florence, that was her name,. She was born in Queensland and 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.

A traditional English lady.

A real hard English task master. Everything had to be right and I just could not– well I was only young.

This was your mother's mother?

Yes old Granny Jackson, and I was very cheeky I suppose them days, I know that in nineteen twenty seven [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.

Oh and do you think that it was successful Bob?

I don't think so, because I've never opened it yet. [laughter]

Did your mother have a good level of education?

No, unfortunately not, she was just – she came here as a housewife.

She would have been what age?

She was a bit older than me dad, I don't know her actual age, women are never keen to tell you their ages, so I never found out, I could have found out I suppose, but it never entered my head them days, because she's been dead since about thirty six – thirty eight years.

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

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.

You came from a big family did you Bob?

No, there is only two boys and one girl and myself, only the four of us.

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

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

Oh!

So that's pretty small.

And did your mother have the children at home, or did she go into hospital.

No, she went to hospital.

Which hospital did she go in to?

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 Roche's which used to be down there where the silo is.

What was that name?

St. Roche's, I think they called it, St Roche's somewhere down there any way.

I didn't know there was a hospital down there.

Somewhere down there, there was, but I wouldn't know –

And your grandmother – oh you have mentioned her, that you didn't get on with her.

I wouldn't like to say –

We won't say anymore about that.

Did you find out the full names of your brothers and sister, and where and when born. Well you have told me where and when born.

John Edward, Arthur Norman and Barbara Isobel.

What are your earliest memories of childhood?

I think the first thing I can remember is them taking grandfather away when I was only three, that's the first thing.

That sort of thing sticks in your mind.

Stuck in my mind ever since.

Describe your family home to me when you were a little boy.

Well it was only a timber house, all timber. There was [extraneous comment: that's just a tractor going cutting hay] no asbestos 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.

What happened when it rained.

They had iron roof and they had weather boards outside.

Big eaves?

Big eaves, all timber structure all together. Timber was cheap I suppose, they

got most of it for nothing anyway.

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

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.

No. You travelled either by walking or by horse?

Yes, horse and a sulky.

Yes.

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]

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

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.

It was more fun in the bush was it?

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 all run in all the bushes and everything and get wet in the wintertime, and when we got to school. Oh it's was too wet, we're going home, the girls all come home dry, we never woke up to that.

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

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.

You used to light fires didn't you?

In the summertime we always –

To flush out the kangaroos?

No to get good feed for the wintertime. We'd see an area, we'd think oh well it's February, we'll go out and chuck a match in , it might burn three hundred acres, or four hundred acres, next winter that's where all the good feed was and that's where we'd catch our kangaroos.

So quite early on you were doing some forestry management.

Well we were villains I'll admit that, but that was our way of getting around things, it was always done.

Yes and you went to primary school.?

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 teach 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 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 ever going on with their further education from here.

Where did they go into from here?

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.

No they couldn't afford it.

No way, they were only on two pounds five a week [£2.5.00]

When did education finish for most people in this area?

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, some of them got five bob[five shillings] a week milking cows. A lot of them sort ended away further to other mills and as the mill closed down, 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 not good them going to those mills.

What was the school like?

Well it was just one big room. Oh there was two schools actually alongside one another, and for the earlier days before my time, they used to have em both bull, but in my time they was a suppose thirty to thirty three [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 nineteen fifty [1950] fire. It was beautiful timber inside them.

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

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

And was there just one teacher?

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, and she just sort of assisted the teacher most of the time. It was rafferty rules all the time at school.

Well she probably had quite a bit to handle.

Well she had no hope of handling us.

What was this about the goannas?

Well the day that we caught the big goanna and took all the books out and put it in the desk and hid the books, she was there for half an hour before she

“and the old goanna came out of the desk and wiped everything off the table”

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 thirty [30] kids in the room and the big teacher, big English bloke, six foot six, and all scrambling, he was pushing kids off to get up on the table himself. And this goanna doing one hundred miles a hour laps around the hall.

It was a big bob tail?

No it was a big race horse. He'd be four feet long, and none of us, well he had

no trouble to find 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].

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

No, it was just rafferty rules. This old teacher would go home sometime after lunch, walk to his house, the house was only about fifty yards away, and we had one way of watching, when he came out, we 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.

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

Not a great, it was too costly for you to go to anything for the money earnt. 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, the way we got playing that we would go and get suckers off a tree where the sucker come out we'd make out 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.

Where did you meet your wife?

Unfortunately. Oh I was playing cricket at Donnybrook, she's a Donnybrook girl, and the funny thing, I knew her father very well, twelve fourteen years before, He working in the timber industry. I used to see him out here when I was carting sleepers, I used to go and have a yarn to him.

Where were you married?

In Donnybrook, nineteen forty seven [1947]

How many children have you?

Two boys and one girl.

Two boys and one girl. And they are grown up aren't they?

All off my hands now. Got the grandkids - they're worse.

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

Well mainly in the bush all the time. I've never worked, well I did do about three years in a saw mill, but I 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 fourteen 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 nineteen thirty seven [1937].

How did you cut the sleepers?

Well you'd fall the tree and cut off the lengths, whatever they used to cut – six foot, seven foot, eight foot, six and nine foot.

This is all by hand saw.

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.

What period of time were you working?

Well off and on since I was – I left school at just over thirteen, 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 still go back.

You must have seen a lot of changes in mechanisation?

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

"my wife's father was a bullock team driver, he came here to Lyall's Mill"

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

My 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 on mud 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, always on a Saturday morning we'd hop on a couple of old 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.

They hauled the logs did they?

Hauled the logs from the bush where the men fell them, they had to pull them in to the rail line. The railway line – one of them went past here, and they, horses used to have to pull sometimes up to a mile, the log probably weighing twelve or ten tons. They'd only have eight to ten horses, sometimes they might have a special lot of big logs, they'd put twelve 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...

They were actually quite cruel to the horses?

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, of 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 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 you should never hit a horse in front of another, because it only upset the lot. And we've seen it plenty of times. So when the tractors came in and took the horses out – 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, cause the horses had a terrible time.

About what time did that happen?

Oh they were here just before the war, the first tractor I saw just before the war, Bunning's had it out here

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

Yes, there was a shortage of fallers for the mills and that because all the young fallers were gone. And Millar's of any of the saw mills had a job to get men for the bush. Eventually I know round about forty one forty two [1941-1942] they man-powered a lot of men for different jobs, but they were nearly all old and something wrong with them.

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

Oh Well I think generally speaking you've seen a slight decline in it ever since the peak periods. I mean, where in our days when were kids, the mill needed to saw what they call about a hundred load a day, now there's very few mills when we were working that's doing more than ten or twelve a day, so they're all little small mills mainly say four or five men jobs. At Wellington they must have had three or four hundred men at one stage. Well they had a baker's shop and a butcher's shop, big grocery store and post office.

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

Oh it was baker's shop everything was there.

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

Well I have heard them say that when they first started here, anyone that was getting about two pounds a day was one of the high paid men of the job, when I first started it was nearly up to three pounds I think.

Did you have any trade unions then?

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 there. 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, was six 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 he said 'Look here' he says 'How long is this strike last Mr. Davis? I'd like to go home to Italy to see my mother' 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 six months [laughter].

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 the after the war?

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 any new Australian type blokes that would out gun the real good old hard blokes that have been it. I suppose ever generation depreciated from one to the next. The next line that came along wasn't as good as the gang that had gone before. There'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.

Ah yes.

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.

Yes. Millars sort of took account of this didn't they?

Yes, I think all mills, but by jove you had to be there, on the spot at quarter past seven [7.15am], 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.

No!

And they'd walk to Dardanup some of them on Monday night to get a revive, that's fifteen miles

They must have been fairly desperate.

Walking never worried them.

Didn't Millar's put on a train?

Yes, Millar's had a train, in the earlier days they used to run a train every Saturday, they'd knock off at twelve o'clock and I think that it used to leave about one. [1pm].

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

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 ten to four [3.50pm] and those that weren't on the train by four o'clock, they stayed behind and walked home.

How far was that then?

Thirteen mile to Wellington there, well they didn't worry, but they used to, the beer in them days was five dozen in a wooden box, and you'd seem 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, have a headache or something, but it wouldn't matter because the boss would be watching them, keeping them going flat out all day, especially the navvy gang. One of the worst blokes was - they used to have a big of cotton or wool tied round their head like that, and the tail would go down the back of the neck, that was the best way to take the sweat, down the back of your neck and down your front. The old Irish bloke used to be a bloke named Corbett, he was one of the gangers in the railway line, when they put the line out for the logs all the time, and he'd be one of the main ones to go to Dardanup Saturday, and on the way home - after he got to Wellington he had to walk four miles back out to his home where he lived. Drunk as a monkey, when he got to about a mile from home, he started yelling out 'Oh Jesus Kate, get the Billy on and cooking, I'm coming home Kate.' The old lady would rattle the girls, that's the two girls, get on girls and get the tea for dad. Anyhow he kept going at that for years. Eventually he died, poor old chap. The following Saturday night her own son got on a horse, said he was going to Wellington, see the boys, went down the road a bit and he had a white sheet, put it around himself and riding up the road 'C'mon Kate get the kettle on, I'm coming Kate'. 'Oh my God' she said, poor old lady 'Tom's soul's come back. The poor fella ' She reckons it was his ghost.

A sort of a Irish joke.

Oh what a terrible joke to put on your own mother though. Tom just laughed, didn't worry him. **

Anyway we'll move on again to the mill town. Was it visited by the priest?

Was there a church or anything?

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. [Roman Catholic] church. There was an R.C. church on top of the Wellington hill there, just past where the double story house is on the bottom, well just on top 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 for Mass, and then she'd walk home again four mile.

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

Did the priest visit them?

Oh they might of. Cause 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.

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

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 standards, they wouldn't have done for

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today, the unions would never have allowed the same things today I suppose, but this was going back many years ago.

There was a hospital wasn't there?

Yes the hospital was where that Mormon 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 pines there.

Did they have any suicides or anything?

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

No, at Mornington I believe that was quite a problem.

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

I was thinking of the loneliness of the life.

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

It was quite a good hospital was it?

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

Any bad accidents at the mill?

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, 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.

That was the mortuary?

That was the mortuary. They'd lay them there over night. One or two bloke's got squashed with the rails. Just where the old store was, they used to have a platform around like that, it was on 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.

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

There was always a dance around. There was one tennis court up near Wheatman's. Oh people used to play for awhile 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 mills 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 it. If you worked it right you could get a dance every Saturday night. It was either Wellington, Ferguson, Mumbullup, Noggerup somewhere, there was always one.

They had visiting bands did they?

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?

Or an old washboard or something like that?

Yes they always seemed to have a terrific time.

Moving on to your broadaxe work and the bridges. There is a very good article in “The Worsley Alumina News’. Number four [no.4] August nineteen eighty two [1982] and I’ll be putting it with this tape. if that’s okay with you?

That’s alright, go for your life.

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

Well the broad axing I don’t know how long it’s been going, or where it was ever invented, but it was one of the main bush works in the earlier days here, but I suppose since the war there’s been no hewn sleepers, they’ve all been sawn sleepers, so the hard work went out of the game. But they’ve still maintained them for doing all the bridge work for the Main Roads.

They’re the bridges that we go over on the main roads are they?

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.

What’s the advantage of them being broad axed rather than sawn?

Well one of the main advantages, they always say, is 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, just 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 b bridges. They always preferred it to be broadaxed.

It would actually last longer then?

Well they so they maintained it does. But then again there is the trouble with sawing it is get them to a mill, putting them through the saw mill, getting them out again and carting them back to the job, where as 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 fourteen span you can do it in three weeks.

That's very good isn't it.

See some of the bridges are seventeen to eighteen inch span, and a nine or ten stringers to a span takes a lot of chopping, but they seem to still think it is the best way.

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

Well you 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 on so that you make it dead true, and as your 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 your keeping dead split on. You can do a thirty five forty foot stringer and only be less than a one

sixteenth of an inch out at the other end, where a saw can't do it because a saw as it gets hotter it rolls.

Are there many broadaxe men left in Western Australia?

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

I guess you wear some big strong boots do you?

I've never worn steel cap boots until I- 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.

You cut your elbow did you?

No I turned it inside out chopping - 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 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, sixteen foot long, sixteen inches deep and four inches wide, and they've got them struck up in the ceiling as feature pieces.

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

Done from Northam, York, right down to the other side of Pemberton Northcliffe, Brookton.

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

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 either painting, or helping drive the nails in, spikes in. That big bridge there what I showed you those pictures of.

That was the bridge at Quindanning.

That took about four months altogether. The big one at Bridgetown, I think took nearly nine 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 gong to last for a hundred years.

I think it will too.

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 of less dry all the time and therefore you don't get that rot in them.

Moving on to talking about conservation and eco-nuts and things like that. Perhaps you'd like to talk about the forestry past and present.

Well I think myself, I know I don't agree with all the forestry policies, I mean there's some things that I don't like. That's their policy, and it'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. I'm always in my own opinion that if they'd have been in the same command as they've got now fifty 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 it's 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 fifty or sixty 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 it's all that good timber just left on the ground.

I know you have, you believe that the forestry burn off –

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 scrub all little birds nesting in October, September, October, November, and they put these huge fires through it, well something has go to go.

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

We burn the same as the old Abos did. We burn every time we can and –

Your method of using fire would be more like the traditional aboriginal method of firestick farming, that's the way they used to so it isn't it?

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

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

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.

But it's a bit of a guidance -

Well it is.

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

April fourteenth nineteen fifty [14th April 1950]. It went through and just cleaned up everything. There was quite a few houses. There must have been eight or nine houses in Wellington went. We lost our house, some sheds, nearly everybody lost all their sheds. And there was another house burnt over here at Lowden, eight miles away and the fire was from here to there in less than twenty minutes. Well if I remember rightly that about somewhere about eleven o'clock the fire was way the other side of the forestry settlement, and by two o'clock everything was black and gone. There was cows burnt everywhere, horses burnt and pigs, everything just went like mad. Well there was fourteen kangaroos burn in a heap on my flat down here, so if it catches kangaroos there is not much hope of you getting out of the road.

Were any people killed?

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

What caused the fire?

Well they don't know for sure. It was a fire that was supposed to have been a controlled fire over at 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 North West 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.

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

"the best thing the forestry have done, they burn their properties"

Well the best thing the forestry have done, they do burn their properties between - joining all farmers.

They've got a policy of a five year fuel build up, and they have over the last twenty years made sure that it is religiously done. Which now that there's no way that any of our bush behind us can get that dirty that you are going to get these inferno fires again. You see when in nineteen fifty [1950] fire came I think that bush had been shut off for something like twenty years. You can imagine the mess that was in the bush and once it 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.

Well we've got a little bit more tape left Bob, are there any other anecdotes or stories about villains you've known, or things in this area that you'd like to -

Oh there's been some terrible men [Bob makes comments which are extraneous: something written down here – here it is] there are some funny boys. There was this old chap that I was telling you about riding the horse with a sheet around him. He'd be one of the greatest villains that ever lived. There was only 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, and he run out to Australia quick, and bought this - 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 was put there more or less to keep him out of mischief I 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 go down to get the supplies. Every day I think it used to leave at twelve o'clock and come back at three 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, 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 after and caught the rooster, and caught the cat, and dropped

them down the chimney and put a wet bag on top of the chimney. Poor old fellow he came home that night the poor old fellow came home that night there was cats and dogs.[laughter]

You were telling me about that man who used to - there was a bit of cattle rustling and sheep stealing around here?

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

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

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 would allocate them a hundred acres here, or two hundred acres, and they'd mark out plots for them, and you could cut that ten acres, and you would that ten, 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 lived, he'd come home to his, where you people have this property now, he'd come home there probably Saturday afternoon, and do a few jobs around the house and go back to the camp on Sunday. And on the way back he'd always take his rifle and shoot a roo or two. 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 hear 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 two big boomer legs sticking out of the top of the bag [laughter] My 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.

And he never got caught?

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 Kookaburras.

What did he do with them?

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.... He'd say they're not too bad, they're young when they get old and furry, they're not too good [laughter]

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

It's been a pleasure to do it.

END OF THE INTERVIEW

Note: There is an article about Bob in the "The Worsley Alumina News" of nineteen-eighty-two.