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SOUTH WEST TIMBER INDUSTRY

Transcript of an interview with

John Scott

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ORAL INTERVIEW

30 JANUARY 1997

English

Interviewer: Christina Gillgren

Interviewee: John SCOTT

Address: 51 Beatrice Road, Dalkeith, WA 6009.

Normal script: Interviewee; Italicised script: Interviewer/summarised parts.

Note: This is not a complete transcript. Only parts relevant to immigrants in the timber industry included in detail below:

I have a faint memory of what happened in the early days after the war but I spent a lot of time down near the Donnelly Mill. There were a lot of interesting characters there. A lot of the men came from quite remote places. We had Lithuanians and people from nearly all over Europe. They were very good workers and very interesting people.

Mention of one person who had a collection of classical records.

These people lived in ten by nine huts. Single huts for single people.

The person who owned the collection of classical records

He did not go out much because he had no transport. Sometimes we provided transport to take the men to nearby towns or to the nearest towns which could be 14 or 15 miles away. But he also saved enough money to buy himself a car.

These people were very saving and hard working and they did not waste anything.

Sometimes there would be minor trouble when the younger ones who hadn't been old enough to go into hotels before the war found, when they were allowed into a hotel in Australia, they didn't know really much about liquor at all. Instead of Australians who would drink beer, they would ask for drinks from the liquors that were stored in the top shelves behind the bar. And these were rather strong, with the result that they were very soon intoxicated.

They'd be picked up and go back to Donnelly on a truck..... and then there'd be an argument as to who wanted to go and who wouldn't. The driver wouldn't waste much time. He'd sorted out his way which was with fists. And then one day, I remember, they came back and... I had a foreman there, an old chap from the goldfields, Harry Martin. He was of Irish extraction, but he had been here all his life..... a very tough old guy.

These fellows that were dropped off the truck, and the truck had to go back to Yornup, I think. Some of them ran behind some trees and then belted this truck with stones. Then there was a free for all and Timms the driver came into our office and said, look you've got to look after me. I'm being set upon by these fellows. Some of them decided it was a good idea to take off... Old Harry was over seventy, Harry Martin.... and Harry had a big dog. I found it very amusing to watch Timms and one or two others running up the hill to get away from this dog and old Harry charging after them. But it all turned out.

Unfortunately we had the police the next day because someone complained of the rumpus and the police decided they's send the ringleaders of the riot - the ones that caused trouble - send them to another mill. I don't think that achieved anything. But

they didn't like having to deal with the police. They thought that was something against them, having to be accosted by the police.

That was the only occasion when we had any trouble really. Everyone got on happily.

Oh, there was one occasion when one man was chasing another around the bush with an axe. But we sorted that out.

What was the reason for that?

They decided for some reason or another... they had some grudge against one of them... I don't remember who it was... But I thought it was a very serious thing to be chased around the mill with an axe, so we stamped on that too. We didn't bring the police into that. We said, you've got to behave and get on to it properly or else there'll be trouble.

John Scott was in charge of construction at Donnelly River:

Where these people Displaced Persons?

They were all Displaced Persons but not of the same race. They were a mixture of people.

There were Yugoslavs as well?

Yes there were Yugoslavs. And Lithuanians...

How many of the mill people were Europeans? Was there a large number of them in proportion to the rest of the workforce?

Ninety per cent of them there were Europeans at the time.

Is this common throughout Bunnings, throughout the mills?

Well, were I was it was because they were we'd recruited from Northam camps. I liked them. They were a good crowd of chaps and it was only when alcohol took a bit of a hand that things started to hot up.

On recruitment from Northam: Well, we'd advise the camp that we, with Millars and various milling companies and Bunnings.... I can't remember now who started the process... the government was keen to get these people into positions of work and we were offering them work, so we were out to chose those we wanted to take. And that's when I said earlier that I preferred to take people who had come from a rural situation in Europe rather than from the city....

The conditions were not harsh, but it was just that they were used to living in small communities, whereas the bunch from the city were a bit the reverse. They were used to living in big communities and they didn't understand living in the bush. I found you couldn't judge a person at all. Those you thought were going to be no good at all, they turned out to be the best of the lot, often.

(Some background/analogy with army recruitment)

...What we did was hand a list of those we wanted to report to Bunnings and they'd come down by rail or however they got down and then we'd take them down to the country.

When they got to the mills, where did they live?

Well we had the single men's quarters which were just a man to a small hut which had a log fire in it. And it was right behind the boarding house so they'd have the meals at the boarding house. There was a shower block and latrines which were communal affairs. And there was fresh water for them and we tried to provide all

amenities they would require but of course they weren't very flash. I don't think we had hot showers for a long time. But they didn't mind.

The final conditions of the hut depended on the inmate. *(A description follows of a 'model' hut where a pianist lived - some details on this person's life).*

On Displaced Persons and the two year contract: Well, some might have lasted twenty years. There was no term attached to it all. They could come to us. If they wanted to go they could go anywhere else they wanted. They weren't tied to Bunnings at all.

Did you have a large turnover of people?

No, anyone we had seemed to enjoy working for Bunnings.

On labour shortages in the 1950s: I know it was hard to get material. One thing in Bunnings, in sixty years they didn't have a strike and they were one of the lowest paid industries in the state. But they seemed to be a contented lot. They were happy with the way they were treated and what they received.

After the Displaced Persons pool of persons dried up, Bunnings sponsored some Italians and Yugoslavs. Do you know any thing about that?

No I don't. I don't remember that Bunnings particularly sponsored any people. When the jobs became available, they were filled. I can't remember just how they filled them. The only trouble we had some discontent was after Christmas holidays. Then the men would say what's on the order book. If there wasn't anything on the order book, they were worried that we wouldn't get orders and they'd be out of job. But you know when the builders went back to work after Christmas the orders would come in and I don't remember a time when they didn't.

On the arrival at women at the mills in the early 1950s:

The women particularly seemed to miss... there was no way of fulfilling their need for any church. The bulk of them were Roman Catholics, so I went to the priest in Manjimup and asked if he would help and he was delighted to help. And he used to go out and hold a mass for them whenever they arranged... every week or two weeks. And that seemed to fulfil their need. Just someone to turn to.

How did they cope with language?

Very well. I suppose their use of language was rather basic for some time, but they seemed to pick it up very readily. They were very intelligent people, I thought. I'd say much more intelligent than the average run of Australian labourers. I think they thought more deeply than the Australians, but perhaps I'm wrong.

We virtually had to train them. That rested with each mill manger to train his crew, and he would pass that on to the various foremen, depending what they were doing in the mill.

When they found they were well received and looked after as well as we knew how, Bunnings if they were married people they were given houses, and Bunnings had the best houses in any mill town.

(Some information about the planning of the Bunnings Donnelly River site)

An incident involving the boiler which blew up at Tone River: A fellow fell off the tractor just near the boarding house. Just over a hundred yards away. There was a blast. The engine driver who was ten feet away wasn't injured at all, otherwise I'd have been held up for murder or manslaughter or something. Terrible thing to do, an engineer who doesn't do his job properly. You can easily test all these things by putting a hydraulic test on them, fill them up with water and pump it up to above the pressure limits of the boiler, but I thought it's been working, it will be all right and I didn't do it. This thing went off. It must have made one heck of a row.

On safety: Under Charlie Bunning we had the lowest accident rate of any industry in Western Australia for several years. If there was any lost time accidents it had to be immediately reported to Head Office to the Managing Director. And Charlie was very keen to break down the reputation that the industry had for accidents. In fact there were accidents. I know at Donnelly, they were unloading a log truck at the top of the landing, and the logs rolled down the hill. The fellow was standing in front of another log there, and he didn't see it coming. It hit him and cut him in two. Another time at the Donnelly, one man started up the docking saws in the early morning when it was cold and forgot what he was doing and he cut his hand off. Then we had periods, as I say, that were accident free. The best industrial accident proof record in the whole of the state, better than any industry.

On newcomers to the industry: We put them on jobs that they couldn't injure themselves. Then there was a lot of trouble. They wouldn't let women work in the mills. The union wouldn't allow it. But Charlie and I talked this over a lot and we decided that we would put women in the mills. Well it worked wonders. I remember at the Tone, one family there had four pay packets coming in every week. The wife was working, the husband was working, the son and daughter were both working.... Then we built an amenities hall. Where they could have dances, stage shows and we invited the local member of parliament to open it. I'll never forget that. The people were happy. The thing was well run... This fellow got up, he was our guest, you see, he said, I've never trusted people like Bunnings. I never will. They only do everything for their own good. He was the Labour man. He wouldn't give us credit for having done anything to help those people. We'd done everything we could. One time they were going to build a club at Donnelly, and I remember thinking, how do we do it. So I drew up a plan of this club... so I put it on the table the next morning. This is what we want. A club where the women can come and have a drink, or the men... the men would go into town and buy bottles of cheap wine. If they can have a glass of beer after work, it's far better for them and they'd be ready for work on Monday morning. Some of these fellows would not be ready for work on Monday morning because they had too much of this wine during the weekend. So then we worked how we would finance this. And Charlie said, Bunnings will supply all the material and men on the mills have got to build it in their spare time. And we'll pay the men, if they're a carpenter, we'll pay them carpenters' rates for all the hours they'd spent on the job. It worked out very well. They had their club. Mervin Hobbes was Charlie Bunning's brother-in-law... we set up Mervin in charge of the amenities...

the late 1950s yes... Mervin was so popular around the mills.. *(some details about Mervin....)*

Did the people at the mills mix much with the townsfolk?

Oh yes. They all mixed together. Nationality did not matter one hoot in hell... If you dealt with everyone else decently you were in. They all did well. I never found any difficulty. Some of the men there, some of the Australians were a bit hard to get on with. We had an engineer driver at Nyamup. Old Macdonald. He was on the job every morning at six o'clock and blow the whistle to wake everyone up.... We all used to eat in the same room in the boarding house.... You couldn't do anything right with Macdonald. I saw him one morning, cranky old devil, he threw everything down on the plate. Everything going everywhere.... he was all right. You get used to these people...

(Some anecdotes about a Britisher who tried to commit suicide: He decided he wanted to commit suicide. He climbed up the top of the fire chute along the elevator but he said when he got up there he didn't want to do it because it was too high).

SIDE B:

Did you have many Italians?

Not more than any other Nationality.

But they were there as well?

Oh yes, some very good ones too. Pedretti. He was with us for many many years. He was a wood machinist for the training and dressing the wood. I think he lived in Bunbury finally, but he was in Collie for many years.

If they were management potential, they'd be given every chance. But as I've told you about Ian Kuber who became Chief Executive of Bunning Bros. *(Some information about this person)*

John Scott suggested that Bunnings did not go ahead and establish the prisoner-of-war camp near Tullis, but he was not sure about this.

END OF TAPE.