

‘The Children are running wild ...’: Uncovering childhood at a forest sawmill camp

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ABSTRACT: Among the many perspectives on the history of Australia’s forest and woodland past, that of the children is one often neglected. Yet children and their families were present, often in significant numbers, in mining settlements, selectors’ blocks and timber camps. Social and material life at forest settlements, however, has been largely ignored by historians and archaeologists in Australia. This paper explores the experiences of childhood at Henry’s No.1 Mill, a forest sawmill and settlement in south-west Victoria in the early twentieth century. It draws upon a range of archaeological and historical sources of evidence to address such themes as education, health and hygiene, games and toys, and family structures. It concludes that children were active participants in the daily life of the mill community. In their toys and games, chores and accidents, children may now be silent, but they need not be forgotten.

1 INTRODUCTION

The experiences of childhood have attracted increasing attention from Australian historians in recent years (e.g. Finch 1999; Haagen 1994; Kociumbas 1997). Common themes have included infant mortality, child labour, education, toys, and Aboriginal dispossession. The experiences of children living in remote forest communities, however, have been largely ignored. Yet children were present, often in significant numbers, at sawmill settlements, miners’ camps and selectors’ blocks. In the case of forest mill camps, children played an active and important role in structuring the social and material environment. This paper explores childhood experiences at Henry’s No.1 Mill during the early twentieth century. It uses a combination of archaeological and historical evidence to examine such issues as changing family size, health and hygiene, schooling, and toys and play.

For the most part, children did not create historical records themselves. Instead, they were written about, by their parents, teachers and others. Historian Jan Kociumbas notes that ‘whether rich or poor, black or white, children leave few records of their immediate joys and fears’ (Kociumbas 1997: xvi). To write childhood history, we rely heavily on what adults wrote at the time and remembered later on. Recreating the experience of childhood must, to some extent, be about both adults and children. Archaeological material, on the other hand, reflects both what adults thought was appropriate for children, as well as evidence of agency, negotiation and manipulation on the part of children themselves. Excavation at Henry’s Mill in 1998 focused on the remains of three house sites. Among the architectural and domestic debris, a range of child-specific items were recovered. Such artefacts are a partial but direct expression of toys and other items acquired, consumed, altered, exchanged, discarded and lost. As no historical evidence survives to link families

with specific houses at Henry's Mill, however, children's actions and intentions must be explored collectively, as a group within their community.

Henry's No.1 Mill was established in 1904 beside the West Barwon River in the Otway Ranges of south-west Victoria. The hills of the region are steep, wet and heavily forested, and supported a substantial timber industry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Davies 1999; Houghton 1975; 1992). Henry's Mill was connected by timber tramline to the rail terminus at the township of Forrest, eleven kilometres to the north. The relative isolation of the mill meant that around 100 people lived permanently on site. The workforce of fifty or so men included at least a dozen who brought their families to live with them at the mill. Men with resident families rented small wooden cottages from the mill proprietors, W. R. Henry & Son. These lay several hundred metres from the mill shed. Unmarried workers shared tiny wooden huts built in the path of a gully, and took their meals in a boarding house nearby. The mill settlement also featured a small general store, a billiard room and post office. In later years the firm established several other mills higher up the valley as well. In 1927 the main mill shed was destroyed by fire, resulting in the gradual abandonment of the site.

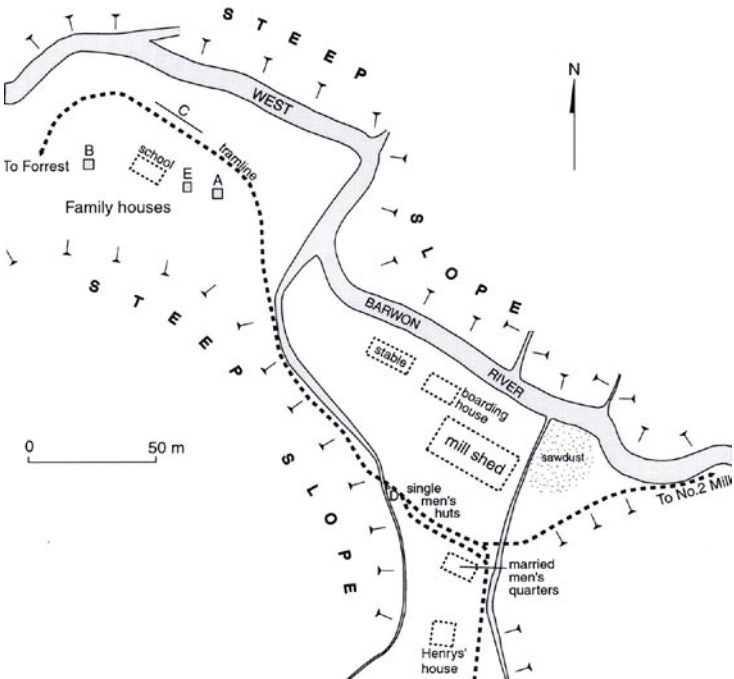


Figure 1. Site plan of Henry's No.1 Mill, Otways State Forest, Victoria.

2 FAMILY SIZE

In 1870 the average family in Australia included seven children. By 1920 this had shrunk to three children (Hicks 1978: 157; Summers 1994: 368). This was probably due to several related factors, including later marriage and child-bearing, better education for women, and possibly the greater

availability of contraceptives. Compulsory education and child labour laws had combined to transform children from potential income producers into dependent consumers, providing emotional value for parents, but financial burdens as well. At Henry's Mill, although there were several larger families present, the number of children per family mirrored the broader social pattern. Women at the site, in common with many others throughout Australia, were choosing to control their fertility and limit their pregnancies to a level well below that of their mothers and grandmothers. Limiting the size of the family was linked with a desire to improve living standards, so that each child could be given a good start in life, as well as women gaining greater control over their own lives. Improvements in public health and sanitation from the later nineteenth century onward lowered infant mortality rates, increased the likelihood of children surviving to adulthood, and reduced the need for large families.

The declining popularity of large families in the early twentieth century was also due to the rising cost of supporting them. For many working families the decision to have fewer children may have been a matter of basic survival, of food, shelter and future job prospects (Reiger 1985: 119). Following sustained economic growth between 1860 and the 1880s, the effects of the 1890s depression dramatically reduced the economic stimulus of immigration and overseas capital. The first four decades of the twentieth century were thus marked by periods of significant stagnation or decline in real incomes and living standards for working Australians. Although wages did rise, the cost of living increased even more, leaving working families with larger bills but less means to pay them (Boehm 1993: 322-6; Grimshaw *et al* 1994: 215; McCalman 1984: 90).

3 EDUCATION

Henry's Mill had only been operating for a few months when the number of children 'running wild' without a schoolroom became a problem. Children in Victoria had been entitled to 'free, secular and compulsory' education since 1872, so parents at the mill were eager to petition the Education Department in Melbourne to provide them with a school and teacher. The mill proprietors were also keen to establish a school, to encourage more men with families to work at the saw-mill and create, they hoped, a more stable workforce (Henry 1909).

The need for a school was argued with care. The mill owners had agreed to pay for the cost of construction and to provide accommodation for a male teacher. The likely initial attendance was cited as around twelve pupils. However, this was likely to increase to twenty, well above the Education Department's typical minimum of nine children for establishing a school. It was also argued that the timber available to the mill was likely to last at least eight years, providing a relatively long-term base for any school established. If a school were provided, more married people with children would move to the mill settlement, increasing numbers even further. The parents pointed out that the nearest existing school was at Barramunga, five miles away over mountainous forest country without roads (Grenness 1905). W. R. Henry complained that he was having trouble persuading married workers with children to remain at the mill without a functioning school (Henry 1909).

Although the initial petition failed, and alternative arrangements had to be made, a subsequent attempt succeeded. 'Otway Saw Mills' School No. 3601 opened at the site in January 1909 (O'Kelly 1909). The schoolroom was erected about 200 metres north-west of the mill shed, in the midst of housing for families. It was 26 feet long and thirteen feet wide (8 m by 4 m), with a gabled iron roof, internal pine lining, a dressed hardwood floor and a weatherboard exterior. Four small windows provided only poor illumination (Henry 1908). It was equipped with two outhouses and a small fenced playground, twenty-two yards square. A 600-gallon water tank was added in 1910, and in the following year a sand tray and observation case for Nature study were obtained as well. Inside, pupils sat on standard issue desks before a portable blackboard. The schoolmaster was provided with a desk and a stool, and there was also two book cases, an easel and a notation frame.

The number of children attending the mill school increased steadily. An initial enrolment of sixteen in 1909 had increased to twenty-five by 1916, and to thirty-eight by 1923 (Wallis 1923).

Around one third of the mill population was thus of school age. Records of correspondence indicate not that the size of families was increasing, but that more workers with families were based at the mill, attracted, at least in part, by the provision of a school for their children. What did the children learn in class? Specific details remain obscure, but the subjects studied by teachers to gain their qualifications suggest that the pupils were exposed to a wide range of subjects during their school years. These included spelling, reading and grammar, arithmetic, history and geography, domestic science, singing, drawing, physical exercises and nature study (Branditt 1922b). The 'monitor system' was probably in place as well, with the older pupils helping to instruct the younger ones.

Under the *Amending Education Act* of 1910, every child in Victoria was required to attend school for the full period of eight years between the ages of six and fourteen. It remains unclear, however, whether many children at Henry's Mill completed their schooling. Disruptions were common, and included family moves, absent teachers and domestic chores. Older boys may have worked in the sawmill, with industrial awards specifying wages for fourteen and fifteen-year-olds (e.g. Timber Worker 1921). On occasion, several mothers sent their under-age three and four-year-olds to the school as well. This prompted the teacher to protest that parents were avoiding their responsibilities and that the schoolroom was turning into a nursery for infants (Prendergast 1916). For the children concerned, then, much of their schoolroom experience was characterised by crowded and cramped conditions, as a single male teacher attempted to convey the basic curriculum to children of varying ages, aptitudes and attitudes.

The school building also provided a social focus for the mill community in which the children were active participants (Branditt 1922a; Davies 2002a). The general rationale was to raise money to purchase books for the classroom. At Saturday evening dances, for example, the desks were removed, the floor was waxed, and music was provided by mill hands playing the accordion, harp and violin. Entry was one shilling, and ginger beer was sold at a penny a glass. The girls sold bunches of violets and other flowers they had grown in the school garden. In 1923, a Christmas Bazaar was held as well. The girls sewed prizes which were auctioned, while the boys raised young plants to sell and made dolls' cradles from lolly boxes. They also erected an 'Aunt Sally', a painted figure of a woman smoking a pipe, and on the day offered small prizes for a knockdown at four shots for threepence. Mothers baked cakes and toffee and made up jars of lollies and peanuts. Almost £30 were raised by this function for the purchase of school books.

4 HEALTH AND HYGIENE

Hygiene played little or no part in school learning at the turn of the century. Children were expected to learn clean habits by example at home. As part of the burgeoning public health movement in this era, however, school hygiene quickly became an integral part of the teaching curriculum in Victoria (Cumpston 1989:120-5; Gandevia 1978:71-2). The use of a common drinking cup and school towel ceased, recognised as potent sources of infection. The cleaning of slates by spitting on them and wiping with a sleeve was no longer allowed. Talks on health, correct posture, public behaviour and, for the older children, the parts of the body, were recommended (Blake 1973: 360). Although schools were supposed to have been built according to contemporary notions of hygiene, the 'antiquated little school room' at Henry's Mill was soon recognised as below the standards of the day (Johnstone 1916).

Diseases such as measles, mumps and chickenpox also remained obstacles for most children in this period, but no effective remedies were available. The highly contagious nature of these viruses meant that once one child fell ill, others would almost certainly follow. The schoolroom shared by the children was crowded, poorly ventilated and ill-lit. It provided an ideal environment for the spread of infection. Although infected pupils were excluded from school for up to four weeks, the way the children lived in close proximity and played together out of school hours meant the exclusion was practically useless, and widespread infection was likely (Stanford 1911).

Workers and their families at the site, however, were relatively isolated from orthodox medical treatment. The nearest doctor was based at Birregurra, more than forty kilometres away, and the

nearest hospital was at Colac, more than fifty kilometres away. From 1915, the children received occasional visits and inspections from the Bush Nursing sister (Priestley 1986: 20-3). Although these inspections discovered what was wrong with the children, treatment was left for the parents to arrange (Fabian and Loh 1980: 142). As a result of this isolation, self-dosing with patent or proprietary medicines by their parents was common. Fragments of at least thirty-five medicine bottles were recovered during excavation of the site in 1998, a large number compared to other archaeological sites of the period in Victoria (Davies 2001a). At least four of these medicines were specifically marketed as cures for children's ailments.

Greathead's Mixture, for example, was advertised as a 'cure' not only for coughs, colds and sore throats, but for diphtheria, croup and scarlet fever as well (Arnold 1985: 68-9). Chamberlain's Cough Remedy was supposed to counter pneumonia and whooping cough. Other medicines from the site included Mother Siegel's Syrup and Mrs Winslow's Soothing Syrup, both of which were used to calm teething infants and to cure diarrhoea in young children (Finch 1999: 81; Calvert 1992: 123-4). In addition, children at Henry's Mill were also subjected to various folk cures. These included castor oil as a purgative or as a remedy for colds and flu, kerosene for sore throats, and eucalyptus oil as a decongestant and disinfectant.

Mothers nursing children through illnesses frequently turned to patent medicines in search of help. These remedies had existed for centuries prior to 1800, but their use increased dramatically in Britain, North America and Australasia between 1850 and the 1920s, due to widespread advertising and frequent narcotic and/or alcohol content. While some of these medicines were harmless, others contained powerful drugs, including opiates, in dangerous concentrations. Lynette Finch has demonstrated how proprietary soothers were implicated in numerous infant deaths in Queensland in the 1890s (Finch 1998, 1999). The drug and alcohol content of such medicines, however, was subject to increasing regulation and control by the early twentieth century (Lonie 1979). Nevertheless, parents at Henry's Mill often had little alternative in their isolation from conventional medicine than to dose themselves and their children with off-the-shelf, commercial remedies. Such preparations were affordable, accessible and offered a reassuringly tangible response to medical problems in the absence of doctors in remote forest areas.

5 TOYS, WORK AND PLAY

Archaeological investigation at Henry's No.1 Mill also yielded the remains of numerous toy fragments from the three excavated house sites (Table 1; see Ellis 2001: 42). These included china and plastic dolls, marbles, tea sets, model soldiers and gaming pieces. In addition, there were more than 30 slate pencils and boards. Organic items, however, such as dolls' clothes and skipping ropes, do not survive archaeologically, while highly valued items were protected and taken away when a family departed. Although the archaeological record may not express the full range of material culture used by children, the remains demonstrate the diverse and prominent nature of child-specific items at the site.

Some artefacts, including German-made bisque doll heads and Bennington marbles, were of exceptional quality and relatively expensive. Parents of at least some children were willing and able to purchase high quality toys for their children, in spite of the award-level wages paid to sawmill workers. Alternatively, these may have come from grandparents or other relatives, or were handed down from earlier generations. Many of the toys were also very contemporary. In spite of their physical remoteness, children at Henry's Mill were able to acquire up-to-date, fashionable playthings. Living on the geographical margins did not necessarily mean that children were deprived of the latest toy offerings. In addition, the recovery of numerous writing slates and pencils reinforces the importance of education and literacy at the site, and the concern of parents that their children would have the same educational opportunities enjoyed by their urban and suburban counterparts.

Table 1. Child-related artefacts recovered from Henry's No.1 Mill, Otways State Forest, Victoria.

| Item | House A | House B | House E |
|------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| Teething ring | | 1 | |
| Mother Siegel's Syrup | | 1 | |
| Chamberlain's Cough Remedy | | 1 | |
| Mrs Winslow's Soothing Syrup | | 1 | |
| Greathead's Mixture | 1 | | |
| Slate pencil | 17 | 11 | 2 |
| Graphite pencil | 1 | | |
| Writing slate | 2 | 2 | |
| 'penny' doll | | 1 | |
| 'china' doll | 1 | 1 | |
| Bisque doll | 4 | 4 | |
| Celluloid doll | 2 | | |
| 'put and take' top | | 1 | |
| Lead model | 1 | | |
| Clay marble | | 2 | |
| Limestone marble | 3 | | |
| Bennington marble | 2 | 4 | |
| Porcelain marble | 1 | 1 | |
| 'clearie' marble | | 1 | |
| German Swirl marble | 1 | 2 | |
| Banded Opaque marble | | 2 | |
| 'Lutz' marble | | 1 | |
| Toy lid | 2 | 1 | |
| Toy ladle | | 1 | |
| Toy teacup | 1 | 1 | |
| Toy saucer | 1 | 2 | |
| Toy spoon | | 1 | |
| Totals | 40 | 43 | 2 |

Reuse and recycling of machinery and household goods was common practice at forest sawmills in this era (Davies 2002b). Children followed the example of their parents by making their own toys. The industrial and domestic environments provided a wide array of potential play objects, from washers and clothespins to bottle tops and pieces of string, adapted or renamed in the course of play. Children modified materials familiar and available to them. Fishing nets were crafted from old pieces of flywire to scoop up minnows from the river. Bows and arrows were made from the local Satinwood tree and used for games of Robin Hood. A stick could be almost anything, becoming a horse to ride, a log for building, a boat to sail or a gun to shoot. Girls skipped rope and played house with rag dolls (Mergen 1982: 103; Schlereth 1990: 93). In fact, it was these toys the children had made themselves whose loss was felt most keenly when the mill burnt out in 1927 (Davies 2001b: 122).

In terms of household chores, gender divisions were clear-cut. Gathering and chopping wood for the open fires and kitchen ovens was a constant job which occupied most boys before and after school. It also provided many with their first contact with axes and saws. Hauling water from the river and tending vegetable gardens also took up time and energy. The domestic duties of girls started early in life, caring for younger siblings and helping their mothers to prepare meals, wash dishes and launder and iron clothes (Evans 1994: 112). There were also chickens to feed and eggs to collect, lamps to clean and verandahs to sweep.

When chores had been dealt with, a wide range of play activities were engaged in. 'Kick the tin', for example, a derivative of hide-and-seek using an empty tin can, was a popular game. Throwing stones at trees, foot races and games of rounders were enjoyed as well. Children at the mill also exploited the play opportunities of the industrial world. They rode on the timber tramway

and swam in the pool on the river dammed by sawdust from the mill. Sheets of green bark from the log-yard could be used sappy-side down as toboggans to slide down the sawdust heap (Evans 1994: 112). Play in forest areas around the mill also added food to the pot. Fish were common in the mountain streams, including the grayling, short-finned eel and blackfish, along with the introduced brown and rainbow trout. Mill children were eager fishers and made sport out of spearing or hooking the fish. They also trained ferrets to catch rabbits, and collected blackberries when in season. The attractions of playing around the mill, however, also had a dark side. Thomas McGlone, a pupil at the mill school, was severely burned when he fell onto the burning sawdust heap next to the mill shed (*Birregurra Times* 1918).

Several historians have expressed pessimism about the potential of games, rhymes, toys and other artefacts to reveal much about the historical reality of childhood. Kociumbas, for example, argues that 'many of these reflect what adults considered appropriate for children rather than the voices of children themselves' (Kociumbas 1987: xvi). Children, however, were by no means passive consumers of toys obtained by their parents. Mass-produced child-specific artefacts of the nineteenth and twentieth century represented a vital medium for symbolic communication between both adults and children and among children themselves, as they negotiated identity and status within their peer groups. They also acquired toys for themselves through barter with peers, purchase with pocket money, and theft (Wilkie 2000: 102). Similarly, they could ignore, lose or destroy toys that did not suit them, and use them in ways not intended by the manufacturer. Children were, indeed, active and creative manipulators of their social and material environment.

6 CONCLUSION

The notion of childhood as a phase of life separate from adulthood was well established in western society by the nineteenth century (Ariès 1962; Zelizer 1985: 5). Childhood play became, in certain respects, a preparation for adulthood, made distinctive by toys and other specially manufactured items, as children learned sex-appropriate behaviour, socialised early into their future roles. Notwithstanding these transformations, however, children at Henry's Mill still made important contributions to their families and community, by undertaking domestic chores, caring for younger siblings, helping with school functions and gathering wild resources. These contributions must be acknowledged if we are to understand the experiences of childhood in forest camps and the role of families as economic and social units.

Children at Henry's Mill formed up to one third of the site's population by the 1920s. In their constant movement and presence, they were a prominent part of family and social life at the forest mill. Their presence also reinforced spatial divisions within the mill settlement. Houses for employees with resident families were located several hundred metres away from the tiny huts of single men. In addition, as mill workers needed a school for their children, and because mill proprietors wanted workers with families, the site soon acquired a schoolroom. Children thus played an indirect but important role in structuring the physical environment of the mill as well. Children were active and fully engaged participants in the mill community. Their ages and status provided them with distinctive concerns, needs and social networks. In their toys and games, joys and fears, they may now be silent, but they need not be forgotten.

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