

My experiences in the timber industry in south-western Australia

Bill (Pat) Gardner
Retired timber worker

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ABSTRACT: This paper describes my early days and how I became involved in the timber industry in south-western Australia. It covers the local Karridale area, the involvement of M.C. Davies and his history of timber mills. I will also discuss surrounding districts and mills in which I was involved during my working life. The felling of timber in the early days was with axes and cross cut saws. This method was used when I was falling. I will discuss old growth forest and regeneration and the use of some of our timbers in fine furniture.

1 INTRODUCTION

Let me tell you how I became interested in the timber industry in south-western Australia. The region is shown in Fig. 1, together with the main townships mentioned in this paper. In the early twentieth century it was difficult to get farmers into our bush in Western Australia. However, the government got these people out very cheaply. I will not say they totally misled them, but the people thought they were being put on to farms and when they actually landed in their area where they were looking for farms, about all they had was tin sheds with sand floors, tents if they were lucky, wild bush and great big karri trees, the local hardwood (*Eucalyptus diversicolor*). Obviously, a lot of them could not handle that and they left and went on their own way.

My parents stayed there for three years and then shifted onto a private property where my father decided he could make more money out of the vegetable growing and hop growing. This brings in very high trellis work, some 18 feet above ground level, which meant an enormous amount of poles were required. I was probably the tender age of 12 when I started cutting poles, and very shortly after that I was on the end of a crosscut saw. So by the time I was 16 or 17 I suppose you could say I was pretty experienced in timber. Later on I went into working in the timber mill, and from there on I experienced a lot of work in the timber mills, and I went into actually falling in Northcliffe, which is karri, and in that time we were falling the karri and in and out of the mill working. Incidentally, the big pay rise for falling in the bush was another three dollars above your wages.

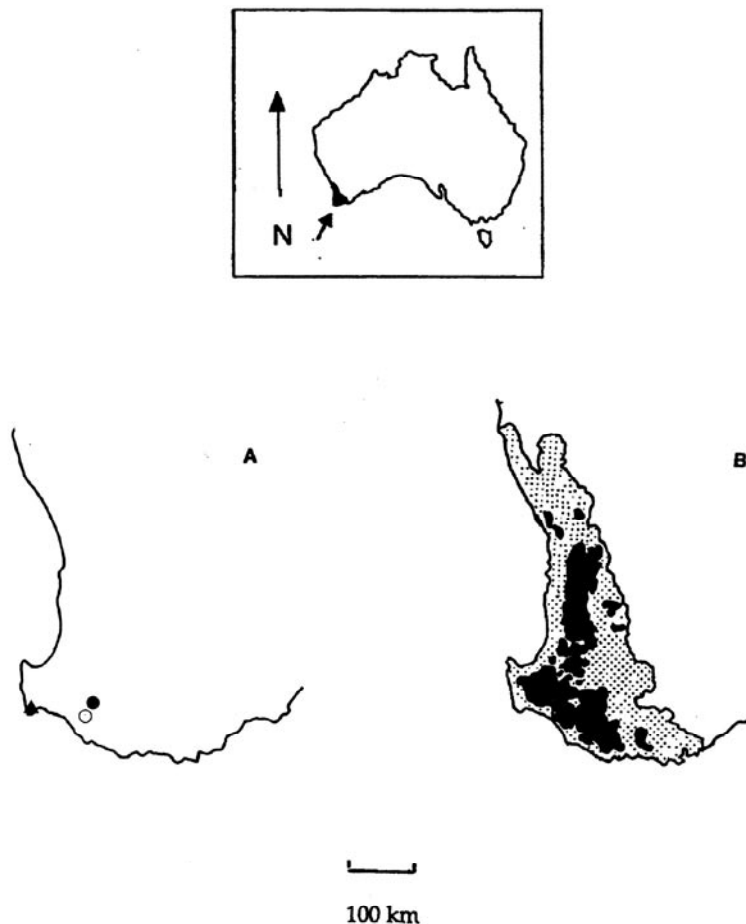


Figure 1. Location of the main hardwood forests of south-western Australia. A shows the towns mentioned in this paper: Augusta (closed triangle, with Karridale just north), Pemberton (open circle) and Manjimup (closed circle). B shows the original extent of the forested region (hatched) and the current extent of state forest (solid).

2 EXPERIENCES IN PEMBERTON

Now what I'm going to do is to take you back to Pemberton. Pemberton started as a State sawmill in 1914 and I mention this because it was one of the largest sawmills in the state, and cut over an enormous area. Actually the area that they finished cutting over was something like 63,000 hectares and so you can imagine it was a huge area.

What you have here is the regrowth and the regeneration which has come after the karri timber was taken out in the first place, and that regeneration is somewhere around 60 – 65 years old (Fig. 2). What I would like to point out is that when they just let the timber grow, they let it grow as thick as possible. The idea was that the trees could grow for light. Then it would be thinned and the

thinnings have been taken out (and they were mostly used for tile battens), so what is left there now is to grow into mature trees. Look at the height of those trunks before you get a limb coming off. This will possibly be an enormous amount of timber for the future generations. A slight burn was often put through the regeneration to keep the undergrowth down. I believe that the main reason for that controlled burning is to let the trees get well up, which will hopefully stop any later big fire destroying the young trees.



Figure 2. Karri regrowth c. 90 years old near Pemberton, south-western Australia.



Figure 3. The Pemberton township in its early years

Photographs of the Pemberton town when it was very, very young show there are still karri stumps. In one photograph there is even a horse standing there and looking down the main street (Fig. 3). I think you could call it a one-horse town!

3 RECOLLECTIONS OF M.C. DAVIES

Now I'm going to leave Pemberton and take you back some years to 1882 and a chap by the name of M.C. Davies. He came into Karridale and took up milling there. He had something like three mills working in that area. He set about building a great little township for his own workers. He built a hall for the local people, a hospital and he had a local doctor, his own doctor, and in those days they probably needed one. One of the interesting points here is that there is an iron ore deposit east of Augusta near Karridale, and they got on to the ore and actually processed their own iron in Karridale, so they were using his own iron there as well.

This chap built the big jetty at Hamelin Bay (on the coast west of Karridale) and that jetty is facing North West. Because we are on a slight point here of the lay of the country, he built another jetty at Flinders Bay (also on the coast west of Karridale) and that faces the South East. The main intention of that was so sailing ships, if they had wind from the north, could load over here at Flinders Bay. A lot of work went in just to help sailing ships.

Now while I am on that, Fig. 4 shows the old technique of felling karri trees with axe and crosscut saw. Karri is an excellent structural timber. Jarrah (*Eucalyptus marginata*) is another local hardwood from a little further north than the karri and it is a fine structural timber too. It is also used for fine furniture.



Figure 4. Early felling techniques for karri. Reproduced from Forests Department (1969, p.13) by permission of the Department of Conservation and Land Management (Western Australia).

Fig 5. shows an old whim used for hauling logs, and like a lot of us, it is fading. But it gives you an idea of the size of the thing. Most were somewhere around eight feet high, but one built in MC Davies time was recognised as the largest whim in Western Australia. It had ten foot wheels on it.

Now later on the M.C. Davies and a chap the name of a Wishart built this tremendous lighthouse we have got in Augusta. They started building that in 1896 and it is still standing there today for visitors to see.



Figure 5. A whim, used for hauling large logs in the karri forest.

4 PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

Now what I would like to carry on with is my involvement in timber in this area. In later years I came to work on a mill at Witchcliffe and there I worked as the millwright . When I went there it was steam and while I was there they changed it over to power, and my job if you like was to completely re construct the interior of the mill, and that meant all saw benches, twin saws and that type of thing and it all worked -- I don't know whether that was good luck or what, but it went all right.

Later on of course I went log hauling for a mill out over the other side of the Blackwood River, which reaches the coast near Augusta. I also did log hauling and driving for another chap who had a mill on the Blackwood also in another area.

We talk about the main person MC Davies but there were also numerous small mills for various people. I cannot name them all but where ever you went a few years ago you would find the relics of when there was a timber mill at some time and that was either a karri mill or a jarrah mill.

Later on of course we had a chap in Manjimup who started up cutting marri and there are houses built with marri in Augusta. I have just learnt recently that there is another mill starting up cutting red gum (marri), and I think it is in the Manjimup area.

REFERENCE

Forests Department of Western Australia 1969. *50 Years of Forestry in Western Australia*. Perth, Western Australia: Forests Department of Western Australia.