The Timber Industry.

This is a transcript from hand written notes from the Blue Mountains Local Studies Collection. The notes are dated from 1982 and no author listed.

One of the main requirements of the early settlers was timber both for building and for fuel. The peculiar and challenging qualities of the indigenous Australian forests soon became apparent, and it took considerable time to develop the tools and equipment to deal adequately with them.

When European settlement began the whole east coast of Australia was forested with a wide range of timber. The fertile flood plains of the great rivers had specially fine forests those from the Shoulhaven River to the North of Queensland include rich supplies of Australian Red Cedar and the coastal ranges yielded high quality eucalypt mixed hardwood and rain forest.

The enormous potential of the magnificent eucalypt forest and rain forest were quickly realised by early white settlers yet their exploration was limited by the inadequacy of the early settler’s resources to deal with such giant trees. Much of the coastal forest was composed of Eucalypts, all of which are hardwoods, some exceptionally hard. On the higher ranges grew Blackbutt, Tallowwood, Spotted Gum and Blue Gum. On the lower ranges grew more open hardwood forests of Ironbark, Grey Gum and White Mahogany. In the most high gullies grew vine tangled rain forest rich in timbers suitable for cabinet making, such as Negrohead Beech and Coachwood, but often unattainable by means of the thick growth. On the South Coast southward from the Shoalhaven River were magnificent stands of Spotted Gum and Stringy Bark.

Such trees blunted the axes and saws of the earliest settlers and their weight and non floating properties made transport virtually impossible in the earliest days. The one tree which was readily workable, floated and had excellent building qualities was the Australian Red Cedar and in less than a century it was logged virtually to extinction.

Australian Red Cedar was a rain forest tree which grew abundantly in the moist alluvial flood plains of the East Coast rivers, a tree not only conspicuous not only by its size and straightness of trunk but also because for a short while in spring its new growth was bright red.

The exceptional qualities and usefulness of this tree quickly became apparent and the search for red cedar by the cedar cutters began in the valleys of the Hawkesbury in 1790, the Hunter from 1801 and the Shoalhaven – Illawarra district from 1811. These districts were vigorously logged and the search for cedar moved North to port Stephens from 1815, the Hastings River from 1823. the Manning River from 1828, the Macleay Rver from1830, the Clarence River from 1835, the Bellingen River from 1842 and the Richmond River and the Big Scrub from 1842.

The methods of extraction were rough, wasteful and so effective so that cedar as a significant timber was virtually finished by 1890.

Early Cedar cutters worked in pairs falling the giant trees and trimming them on the spot usually with considerable wastage. Logs were hauled to the nearest sawpit usually dug into the loose soil of a dry creek bed, six feet deep and over twenty five feet long. With levers and rollers made from saplings cut nearby, the hewn logs were man handled over the pits and sawn by means of crosscut saws and wedges into planks. Two men handled the saw, the “top notcher” above guiding the saw along its line or notch, the bottom notcher below sweating in the confined space and showered with red sawdust from every stroke. Wedges hammered home by a bush made maul held the cut open and allowed the saw to continue. The sawn planks were manhandled to the nearest waterway and thence taken to Sydney. Later the massive logs merely squared by broad axe were floated down to the river mouths for shipment to Sydney

Pit sawing produced a characteristic finish- straight scars left by the crosscut saw were markedly different to the semi circular marks left by the powered circular mill saw. The great weight of these pit sawn logs must have been daunting even to the hardy pioneer sawers.

The spread of settlement was associated with the need to build railway lines and bridges. The main use of hewn timber as railway sleepers and as girders for bridges. Such timbers were prepared in the forest, being felled by axe. Split into suitable sized billets by wedge and maul, from each of which the sleepers were cut by broadaxe and adze. Eucalypt hardwoods were invariably used, Ironbark, Tallow Wood and White Mahogany. Pole and pile timber was also prepared in the forest although these required less work than squared timber. Piles and posts were also used extensively in wharf and marine construction and for this Turpentine was usually selected since it was particularly resistant to marine borers.

After felling and shaping, such timbers were removed from the forest, usually by bullock teams since Australian hardwoods often weighed many tons. Water proved the easiest mode of transport in the early years and deserted wharves on lakes and rivers of the east Coast are reminders of the days when special paddle wheel steamers called “draghers” usually stern wheelers with a hoist amidships were used to carry the logs down stream to the sawmills and coastal shipping ports.