The Bush Timber Workers.

A transcript of hand written article in the Blue Mountains Local Studies files. It was written in the early 1980’s by a Mr Gooly of Blaxland.

In the pioneer days the timber workers of the bush, the sawyers, hewers, axemen, splitters, charcoal burners and bush carpenters, used the few traditional tools to extract the vast quantities of timber required for the needs of the expanding cities and towns and for the development works such as railways and bridges needed to open up the country.

The few fundamental tools required were the cross-cut saw, pit saw, sharpening files, adze, broad axes 9 designed for either right or left handed axemen), shovel, spade, maul (or sledge hammer), wedges wood augers, hammer, hatchet, crowbars, rakes and slashers (or brush hooks).

One of the main characteristics of the timber worker was his all round capacity, the skill and basic know how, that enabled him to earn a regular livelihood. Many were itinerant workers and they moved from place to place in the sparsely settled land and this was the pattern until larger communities developed in the regions and timber districts.

Australian axemen and sawyers reached their zenith by the end of the First World War and from then on the encroachment of the mechanisation, specialisation and the inflow of more semi skilled labour hastened the disappearance of the old time timber workers. The change brought about by the War of 1939-45 , especially in the use of heavy tractors to haul timber and the introduction of mechanical chain saws altered the nature of the timber industry and the days of the pioneer bush workers was over.

In the very early pioneer days all timber was pit sawn. The sawyers lived in the forest in huts close to where the tallest straight trees grew up the steep slopes of a valley. After felling a selected tree and cross cutting the trunk into the desired lengths the logs were rolled to the saw pit on lower ground.

A saw pit was dug to a depth of three feet with the top platform of logs being raised to the required height to provide a working platform and also a secure base to spread the weight of the log.

The top sawyer was the master craftsman. He was responsible for the sharpening and care of the tools and foe checking the quality of a standing tree before it was felled, striking the trunk with his axe the resulting sound indicating to his practiced ear whether the tree had a hollow core. This care in selecting was necessary as a poor tree cost many wasted hours of fruitless effort. The perfect tree had a straight trunk with few if any branches for the first fifty feet. When the selected log was rolled on

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colour.

In addition to the pit sawyers other bush timber workers made their living from splitting timber. They usually worked as mates, two or three together ? messmate, mountain ash or other suitable straight grained trees, on locations that were accessible for the bullock dray to remove the complete split material from the site. Their product was basic to the needs of the developing colonies- weatherboards, rails, posts, shingles, hurdle timber, billets and rafters.

The few simple tools needed for splitting timber did not change in form or use throughout the pioneer period. The mallet was made by the splitters from dense hardwood, either a separate head and handle joined and wedged or sawn from one piece of timber in form like a club.

The froe was a forged iron broad ended wedge that cleaved the billets, also called the “paling knife”

The regular work pattern of the splitters consisted of tree-felling, cross cutting the trunk, breaking these sections in regular shaped billets with maul and wedge and finally the billets were split with the paling knife. The spitting was done by the method of dividing the billet into equal halves and again in the same way until the required thickness was obtained. The paling knife was made to work by leverage and in free splitting timber, little leverage was requires, the knife dividing the billet into clean smooth shingles by merely driving it with the mallet into one end.

Prolonged wet weather would prevent the completed split timber being taken from the site by bullock dray. This timber was carefully stacked to enable the green timber to dry slowly. This air drying or seasoning kept the timber free from serious distortion caused by rapid drying.

Considerable experience and skill was needed to successfully fell forest giants. After selecting a suitable tree and deciding where to fell it a scarf was cut into one side by the axeman, then planks were inserted in the slits axed into the opposite side. Planks were laid across to form a platform and either a cross cut saw or two axes were used to topple the tree. Control of the direction of the fall was effected by leaving more uncut timber on part of the trunk between the scarf and the back cut which could also act as a brake. If a cross cut saw was being used creaking noises from the tree would indicate to the sawyers the progress of their work and the skilled workers then stop cutting and insert a wedge into the saw split. By hitting the wedge with a maul the resultant lift or tilt would be sufficient to fell the tree.

A tradition of mateship was formed and developed by mutual need amongst the pioneer timber workers real bush mateship, of mates who needed each other for constant alertness, vigilance, attention to detail and patience were necessary to prevent serious injury or death.

With closer settlement after the 1860’s, timber workers comprised men who worked full time in the bush and experienced selectors who when crops failed or in slack seasons were able to pay their way by means of their axe and saw.

Deep head gold mines were constant consumers of vast quantities of forest axed, sawn and split slabs and props for tunnel and shafts, beams and posts.

Charcoal was an essential raw material for the blacksmith. In the early pioneer days coke made from coal was not always available nor cheap enough. Charcoal burning is an ancient craft producing a fuel that will burn at twice the heat of wood, light in weight and easy to transport.

One method used was to make stacks the wood bee hive shaped, covered with small timber and then green vegetation, finally with clay and earth with only a small hole left in the top. Combustion had to be very slow and the stack had to be watched until the burning process was complete. This method was time consuming, so trenched were dug with a domed cover formed from smithy forged iron, and later when available curved galvanised corrugated iron. For the small farm forge the selector would process his own by collecting the charcoal that was left behind when large forest trees or logs were burnt in a bushfire.

As settlement expanded improved roads were constructed with river crossings spanned by timber trestle bridges built by bush carpenters. Manpower and timber was cheap, so the bush carpenter and his gang erected a variety of bridge forms, from the simple to the complex, using large and small timbers both sawn and uncut logs. All manner of ingenious and improvised structures were built to solve problems of site use and expense using criss crossed beams and vertical diagonal and horizontal timber to build structures that served their intended purpose for many years.

With the extension of railway lines further out into the country there was an increased need for first class railway sleepers. The bush timber workers would compete with the saw mill in supplying the hewn sleepers which was preferred to sawn sleepers because it was more durable; he fashioned it with the broad axe and adze and this occupation was a means of livelihood for many men in the forest areas of eastern Australia.

After long days of labour in the bush the timber workers did not lay aside the axes and the saws at the end of a weeks work, but instead they practised for the classic wood chopping and sawing events held regularly at country shows in which they took pride in competing against other bushman to see who was the champion. The respect and affection for the axe and saw held by old time bushmen still remains among their descendants, having been handed on from father to son, and wood chopping and sawing contests held at city and country agricultural shows still attract considerable interest and are popular features as is evident from the large number of entrants for these contests.

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 During the gold-rush period especially during the late fifties and the sixties the main mode of conveyance between the coastal cities and the inland gold –rush fields were the coaches of Cobb and Co. The coaches imported from America by Cobb and Co. were known as ”through braces” because the springs unlike traditional English coaches were made of closely packed leather. The rough bush roads gave Cobb and Co. coaches little worry for they rolled over the corrugations and pot holes without damage. Passengers depended for their speed and safety on these leather springs and the coaches were able to transverse tracks impassable to other vehicles.

Cobb and Co. coach drivers became legendary figures noted for their skill daring and punctuality, better roads combined with the Cobb and Co network of livery stables, booking offices and repair and maintenance works results in better communications and a regular and reliable means of travelling for the people of the inland. Before the expanding railways gained the ascendancy, Cobb and Co. set high and consistent standards of reliability.

This far flung transport network provided regular work and good wages for wheelwrights, coach trimmers, coach painters, harness makers and repairers and blacksmiths. Throughout the country in the large and smaller towns, craftsmen set up in business catering for the transport requirements of country people, farmers and travellers.

With the unlocking of the land under the land settlement Act the subsequent division into smaller areas, men eager for land piled high their wagons with tools, food, farm implements and family, traversed the country to select the farm of their choice.

Early German immigrants brought with them to South Australia and then to Victoria and new South Wales the traditional high-sided wagons superbly designed to encompass a wide range of general farm work as well as for the transport of goods and family when travelling to the new country.

Colonial wagons were the end result of years of modification and experience and by the closing years of the nineteenth century the wheelwrights had reached the zenith of their craft. The wheelwrights had to be superb craftsmen, as he was required to be highly skilled in other trades such as carpentry, blacksmithing, coach painting, decoration and upholstery. The end result of those skills were wagons of rugged heavy construction; light and fast buggies; covered or ordinary spring carts; tip drays and delivery vehicles for tradesmen. The major concern for the wheelwrights was with strength and fitness for the job and appearance that complimented the form of the vehicle. Appearance came from the painting of it with glowing, semi translucent, part gloss preservation paint, oil based containing hand ground pigments.

During and after the railway boom of the 1880’s the iron rail network spread out over the states forcing many of the teamsters with their wagons and horses from the tracks and roads. In inaccessible mountainous regions and in sparsely settled pioneering territory well away from civilisation the teamsters continued to perform invaluable service and were still indispensable in country life.

Their way of life had changed slowly in the years that had seen such change in the country, camp sites were still chosen for water and suitable grazing for the horses, forked sticks with a sapling dropped in between held the billy over the fire; the billy was often simply a seven pound treacle tin and lid, through the top of which a wire had been fastened and thus hung from the hook and chain over the fire. In prolonged wet weather the teamsters made hooded short cloaks to protect them from the rain by cutting the stitches from one side of a corn sack and securing it to fit as a hood that could be draped over the head and across the back. Two or more bags sewn side by side gave better resistance to rain and cold.

 The Pioneer Fireplace

The fireplace and chimney were the focal point of Australian family life in the pioneer days. The pioneer families first built their chimneys and fireplaces from the bush material close at hand and which they simply collected stone and mud, wattle and daub, slabs and logs and with a basic approach created structures that stood the test of time. Lutes, bricks and galvanised iron were used. The designs were all different, of all shapes, but in the main worked efficiently in all winds. The art of building a chimney that does not smoke has to a large degree been lost, but with a well built chimney the kitchen would not become hot even on a hottest days because of the constant excellent draught passing through the kitchen and up the chimney.

The early pioneer chimneys had pots suspended on chains, later these open fireplaces were replaced by cast iron fuel stoves. The fire was kept going almost continuously and an abundance of boiling water was always available in the large fountains of each cast iron with long brass taps.

The pioneer women took great pride in their kitchens. The walls and hearths were whitewashed and the stoves blackened. The effect of stark black cooking pots and fountains and spotless white washed walls and hearth was splendid to see and much of the character of Australian pioneer life derived from those early charming and workable kitchens. Full of warmth, steam, the aromas of good home cooked food and redolent with the scent of burning gum tree wood and native pine.

When the Australian country kitchen began to disappear with increasing affluence a stable, creative, healthy life style went with it and family life, and family life was the poorer as the focal point of warmth and conversation was lost. The pioneer fireplace and kitchen was one of the factors that helped to make Australia great and those who loved the Australian way of life and wish to recreate it in their own individual life style could not do better than to retain or build open fireplace so that they can pass on the great Australian family tradition of fireplace and kitchen- that important place where people once had time to sit and talk, and afterwards to think before the glowing coals of the fire of native Australian wood.

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 Pioneer Tools.

The history of Australia is a fascinating story of pioneer endeavour in a new land.

The early settlers were faced with the formidable task of wresting a livelihood from a hard and alien land. Life in the bush was tough and the pioneer had to contend with heat, drought, flood, insufficient capital and equipment with great isolation.

However, self-reliance, ingenuity and versatility characterised the early settlers.

The immediate problems of survival in the bush meant that the settlers had to construct essential buildings as soon as possible. Materials were generally in short supply, limited to those found in the area; tools were scarce, inferior in quality and barely adequate to cope with the hard native timbers; the settlers limited in building skills. They built with split timber slabs, stone, brick ,wattle and daub and later in sawn timber. Despite this poor construction those early buildings had innate qualities which began the tradition of building design now recognised as characteristically Australian especially by the use of the verandah designed to shade the building from the sun and protect them from rain.

Modern technology has vanished many of the tools which were of such importance to the early pioneers, so that people of today do not understand the use to which they were put or even know what they were like when they came across he names of such tools in books or articles on Australian life.

Take the maul for instance. The maul was extensively used by the pioneers and early timber workers in sleeper cutting, post and rail splitting and to split the slabs used on early bush buildings.

In sleeper cutting the maul a large wooden mallet was used to drive the splitting wedges which produced the billets from which sleepers was squared. The rounded head varied in length from twelve to fourteen inches, the diameter from four to six inches. In manufacturing the maul, the toughest timbers were sought to ensure longer life.

To prevent splitting circular steel rings one inch in depth three eights of an inch thick were fitted over each end. After careful trimming of each end, the rings were hammered on; as the face of the maul wore so the rings moved upward. The maul was fitted with a sledge hammer handle. In bush work the maul had several advantages over the steel sledge hammer. It did not burr the head of the wedge and in the isolation of bush life it could be replaced from local timbers; the handle if broken could also be replaced by a suitable type of small tree trimmed to size. The rings of course had a long life.

In later years the maul was replaced by the sledge hammer weighing from eight pounds upwards. Brought from the hardware store it was of very hard steel highly tempered and many bushmen re-tempered a new sledge hammer because a miss hit was likely to produce flying splinters of steel especially on a cold morning when the brittleness was accentuated. The head of the sledge would be removed from its handle and placed in the camp fire until it had reached the degree of redness which experience had taught was the right temperature. It was then taken out of the fire and allowed to cool slowly alongside the fire. The result of this operation was a malleable surface.

Wedges were essential items for the pioneer and timber worker. Originally they were made by the country blacksmith, but in later years they were factory made in quantity and were improved in design.

A much smaller one handed maul weighing between two and four pounds with a ten to twelve inch handle, was used for splitting shingles. The splitting knife or chisel, known as a froe was shaped somewhat like a butcher’s chopper.