

JOHN KRAMER'S INTERVIEW WITH HAROLD 'PETER' THOMPSON (p. 1-5)

Part A **Date: 22 January 1984** Place: 60 Clarence St, Woolgoolga (Peter's home)

General Information

- Peter was born at Swan Creek on the Clarence River, although his family was living at Corindi at the time.
- Date of birth: March 1895.
- Family property at Corindi was near the Red Rock turnoff. Sir John See had property adjacent to theirs.
- Peter's father came out from Britain on a sailing ship as a veterinary surgeon, accompanying horses for Mr William Small. He then settled on the Clarence.
- Peter's father ran a 'butcher boat' on the Clarence River for Messers Macauley and Macleod (butchers). Their boats were the only way to deliver meat around the district. They used to take meat to cane farmers, etc.
- Peter's father got married and lived on the Clarence for some time. It was a time of many floods which resulted in economic hardship for many. Some people, including Peter's father and family, the Eggins family, etc, decided to move down to Corindi to try their luck there.
- Peter was the middle son of three boys: Jim, Peter and Bert. A fourth boy, Charlie, died at the age of five years from cholera. Subsequently a cousin was taken in and raised with the remaining three boys.

Working Life

- Peter worked at Ulmara 'for a long time'; he was a master slaughterman. 'I would dress a beast in fifteen minutes.' But he didn't particularly like this type of work.
- He worked with bullock teams with 'Jock' Blackadder at one stage.
- Peter also worked on the Great Northern Timber (GNT) Co's railway (see below).
- He was knocked back for army service in WWI due to a bad right foot injury which resulted in permanent swelling of the right foot.
- Peter's Certificate of Discharge from the Australian Imperial Expeditionary Force gives the following information about him:

Discharged as medically unfit after examination in Lismore on 24 February 1916. Certificate completed April 1916. Age at this time 21 years, one month. Complexion dark. Hair brown. Height five feet nine³/₄ inches. Eyes brown. Grade butcher. Scar dorsum of right foot. Scar on shin 3 inches above ankle. Intended place of residence Upper Corindi. Rank Private (for one day only).

GNT Co's Railway Line

- 'I worked on it'.
- Peter can't remember the type of loco: 'a slow one, but a powerful one'. Apparently it came new to Woolgoolga.
- The line comprised steel rails throughout.
- The line ran from the mill, crossed several creeks, went across Brickhill Flat, etc, etc.
- Peter's wife's father helped to finish laying the line.

- Bunty and John Walker, two Tasmanians, built the truss bridges on the line.
- The driver of the loco was Adam 'Mick' Wolf. 'You had to be someone to ride on the loco ... the boss was on the loco: Old Foot ...'
- A normal load of the train was five wagon loads, each containing 7 or 8 logs i.e. 35-40 logs per train.
- The loco used to push the empty trucks on the trip out, then pull them home.
- Only one steam loco ever ran on the line. There were no passenger carriages or fancy rolling stock.
- Peter's job was to load the wagons at the terminus (and presumably unload them at the mill). Also on this job was Percy Tuckey (father of Roma Want). Loading was done using the steam loco – it ran forward with a line attached to the log. This line ran around a right angle via a pulley and pulled the log up a ramp and onto the wagon.
- Each wagon had a little platform at the back where someone could ride: each wagon had a hand brake which could be wound on.
- The loco had wooden brakes.
- No accidents or deaths occurred on the line.
- Logs were brought in to the terminus by bullock teams. One way by which they were brought in was on a 'catamaran', a device constructed according to a plan by Mr Foot. This comprised of two parallel, specially prepared, timber logs with steel rail cross pieces. (JK: I'm not sure if this was a type of 'slide' or some sort of mobile object which was dragged along the ground).
- Mr Saxon was the head man of the GNT Co. (Peter can't remember his Christian name) He was drowned in Sydney: soon afterwards the company went into liquidation. The mill was dismantled, the track pulled up and everything (including the loco) was sent to Fraser Island, off the Queensland coast.
- The line was dismantled by Peter, plus other locals such as Deny Younger and Bob Green. The rails were light rails of 30ft lengths ('I could just lift one'). They were new; many had come from BHP.
- The line had fish plates, dog spikes and wooden sleepers.
- Peter is unable to confirm or deny that the steam loco was sent from Fraser Island to Briggsvale later on.
- Sammy Jones was brought out from England by the British Australian Timber (BAT) Co. He had 'bad lungs'. He was very good with figures; used to work for old Saxon (GNT Co.). He found out 'there was a lot of money in timber'. He bought a bullock team and ended up with 4 or 5 teams.
- A boat went ashore on the beach near the entrance of Woolgoolga Creek/Lake in 1912. It was fully loaded with timber. Peter, who was still on crutches because of his recent accident with his right foot, rode down on his horse to see it. The boat was unloaded, refloated and taken to the jetty (and lifted on to it) for repairs. After it was repaired it was reloaded and sailed for Sydney.

Part B **Date: 29 January 1984** Place: 60 Clarence St, Woolgoolga (Peter's home)

Further information on GNT Co's Line

- The loco did not have a bell but it did have a whistle. It burned wood. There was no fireman; the driver had to do everything.
- Usually the crew of the train were the driver, Adam Wolf, and the two 'brakemen' Peter Thompson and Percy Tuckey.
- Horses were never used on the line, although two horses were used to take timber on wagons from the GNT Co's mill to the jetty.
- At the terminus there were no complex track arrangements: no points or loops, probably just a dead end fed by one or more slides along which the previously mentioned 'catamarans' were hauled.
- The type of timber carried on the line was 'anything they could get: box, ironbark, pine, tallowwood, etc.' Peter is not sure where the timber went after milling. That is, what sort of markets the mill served.
- Timber was loaded at the terminus as well as two other 'depots' on the way: Thorn's Creek and Arrawarra, near Embankment Road.
- Only five sets of wagons were in use at any one time. They were replaced when broken, and they did get knocked around a bit.
- GNT Co never had its own ships.
- At the GNT Co mill there would have been 20 – 30 men employed.
- Without stopping along the way, to get from the terminus to the mill with a full load took approximately one hour. Going out with the empties took, perhaps, fifteen minutes less. Sometimes, when it was wet, the loco would slip and Peter and Percy would have to walk ahead sanding the rails.

BAT Co's Line

- Only one loco ever ran on the line. Peter doesn't know where it came from or where it went on leaving Woolgoolga.
- BAT Co's line ceased to operate when it became uneconomic to bring timber in.
- Rails were steel and heavier than those on the GNT Co's line ... 'They were railway rails'.
- There were steel rails beyond the top of the incline as well; horses were used to haul wagons up there.
- Wagons from BAT line did not go to GNT line subsequently.

Family History

- Peter's father had a cancer operation in 1916 at the age of 59 years. He had most of his tongue and both sides of his jaw removed. The operation was done in Sydney by Dr Hugh McCormack. Peter's father lived to the age of 93 years.
- Peter's mother lived to the age of 87 years.
- Peter was born in 1895.
- Peter married around 1917. His wife's name was Beryl. She died many years ago of bowel cancer. They had six children:

Bob: somebody else's child. Beryl had him already when they married. Bob later married Tibby. Now dead.

Jim: Rat of Tobruck. 'Drank himself to death.'

Jean (Jim's twin): now dead.

Ivan: died of cancer.

Joyce (Miller): still alive.

Iris: married a local Sid Moller. 'Dropped dead from a heart attack. Greatest woman that ever lived.' Beryl was still alive at the time.

Medical

- Peter had quinsy which burst on him out near Bucca in his early 20's.
- He used to go to Dr Dolman but fell out with him over his tonsils.

'I live on facts, as near as I can.'

Part C **Date: 17 June 1984** Place: 60 Clarence St, Woolgoolga (Peter's home)

GNT Co's Railway Line

- It was built by various people. Construction was completed by Jack Baker, Peter's first father-in-law, who had been previously working at Dundoo Sawmill (He had come up from Tasmania some years beforehand).
- There were no points along the line.
- Peter got his job with the GNT Co soon after he was married for the first time.

Ulmarra

- Peter was working here as a slaughterman when he enlisted in WWI. He was rejected. His boss' son was accepted, and Peter returned to Ulmarra to resume work as a slaughterman.
- Not long afterwards the boss sold the business and Peter moved down to Upper Corindi to do some slaughtering work with his family. His Ulmarra boss gave him a parting gift of 500 pounds.
- Soon after this Peter got married and got a job with the GNT Co.

Medical

- Peter recalls an attack of gallstones between the wars. Somebody gave him 15 drops of laudanum which knocked him right out. He went to Dr Holland in Grafton soon afterwards and was put on treatment to dissolve the gallstones. Peter says this eventually worked. He was also told to stop working, but as he had six kids to feed he couldn't. He was girder cutting at the time.

Woolgoolga Jetty

- Con Graham was the wharfinger 'for years and years'. His father held the same position in Coffs Harbour earlier.

- No loco ever worked on the jetty: two big draughthorses pulled the wagons out on to the jetty. 'I used to have to shoe the bastards – Sunday morning work!'
- Two cranes were on the jetty; one at each end. Both fixed i.e. not travelling.
- Peter is not aware of any travelling cranes working on the jetty. However, as he couldn't recollect the destruction in 1937 of the outer end of the jetty, presumably he wasn't around at the time. (JK: I couldn't work out where he was at this particular time.)
- The outer crane was used for pile driving by means of a rope. 'We drove a lot of piles in the jetty in my time.'
- Jimmy Pearce, a PWD employee from Coffs Harbour, used to come out from Coffs to do repairs on the jetty.
- All 3 timber mills, BAT Co, GNT Co and 'The Geebung Mill', had rail connection with the jetty.
- Peter is not aware of any fatal accidents occurring on the jetty.

Shipping (Woolgoolga)

- Some ships that visited Woolgoolga regularly were the '*Fitzroy*', the '*Dorrigo*' and the '*Abel Tasman*'.
- The *Abel Tasman* used to take timber regularly to New Zealand from the ports of Grafton, Woolgoolga and Coffs Harbour. When loading at Woolgoolga not much would be put at the front of the ship so as to prevent the bow hitting the sand; the load would be topped up at Coffs Harbour.
- Captain Turner was the Master of the *Abel Tasman*. Sometimes he would invite Peter on for tea. The first mate was Peter Dalzell, and the second mate Allan Deeds. The previous first mate (Archibald) had married a Grafton girl and subsequently left the ship.
- No Navy vessels ever called at Woolgoolga as far as Peter knows '...there wouldn't have been enough draught for them'.

Timber Mills Three that Peter speaks of:

- BAT Co's mill: located at base of jetty.
- GNT Co's mill.
- 'The Geebung mill': located somewhere above the intersection of Market St and Nightingale St. It was owned by 'Bully' Robinson, Frank Murphy, Alf Johnson and Wickham (storekeeper). It had a wooden rail line connection to the jetty. Trolleys were pushed by hand or pulled by horses.

BAT Co line

- Ernie Rogers was the loco driver. '... God he could swear!'
- Horse stables were located at the top of the incline.
- Horses were used to pull loaded wagons along wooded rails to the top of the incline. Here wagons went down by a pulley system; pulling up empty ones as they went down.
- Wagons were a bit different to the GNT Co ones.
- Peter is not clear as to the disposal of the BAT Co's loco, but he is fairly sure it did not go to Fraser Island.



Appendix 1

Having read 'Peter Thompson's reminiscences' Woolgoolga Rotarian David Fayle decided to have a look at Trove to find out about GNT Co. GNT was already in the hands of liquidators by the time this ad was published in 1917:

SAWMILL FOR SALE.
Great Northern Timber Co., Ltd. in Liquidation.
Hardwood Sawmill, comprising up-to-date Band Saw Plant. 7½ miles Tramline. Climax Loco. and Trucks. Extensive Bush. Tenders closing NOON on OCTOBER 20th, 1917, are invited for the Complete Plant and Assets of the above Company in one lot.

All particulars from
LIQUIDATORS,
32 Jamieson-street, SYDNEY.

In the same issue was this ad:

COTTAGE PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS FREE.

We post to any address, free of charge, our "Cottage Home" Catalogue, containing 26 Modern Designs of Weatherboard Cottages, together with complete Price List.

Detailed Specifications also furnished if required.

Inquiries Solicited.

A. C. SAXTON AND SONS, LTD.,
Successors to

Advertising. (1917, October 17). *The Sydney Morning Herald*(NSW : 1842 - 1954), p. 6. Retrieved May 26, 2014, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article15737361>

Alexander Charles Saxton was indeed drowned, while sailing his yacht off Newport, but in 1926, not 1917. Moreover, it was an A. Saxton (son?) who owned the timber mill at Bark Hut that burned down in Oct 1928.

TIMBER MILL FIRE. (1928, October 26). *Townsville Daily Bulletin* (Qld. : 1885 - 1954), p. 6. Retrieved May 26, 2014, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article61035112>

TIMBER MILL FIRE. GRAFTON. October 25. Damage estimated at between £10,000 and £16,000 was done by a fire which destroyed a timber mill owned by A. Saxton and Sons at Bark Hut, near Woolgoolga. The fire occurred early this morning, and it was impossible to save the plant or stock. About 30 men will be thrown idle as a result of the fire

The late Mr. A. C. Saxton. (1927, April 9). *The Port Macquarie News and Hastings River Advocate* (NSW : 1882 - 1950), p. 4. Retrieved May 26, 2014, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article112534332>

The Late Mr. A. C. Saxton.

Probate has been granted of the will of the late Mr. Alexander Charles Saxton, of A. C. Saxton and Sons, Ltd., timber merchants, of Pyrmont, who was accidentally killed when on a yachting cruise off Bungan Beach, near Newport, in September last. leaving an estate of the net value of £192, 819 in New South Wales, of which £29,021 represented realty, £52,316 shares in public companies, and £39,691 Government stock.

Given the size of this estate, it is possible that Saxton had bought up GNT's assets. In which case, Peter's story would have some element of truth, though, it would seem, a little confused.

Appendix 2

Ian McNeil contributes the following:

Allen Taylor and Co Ltd provided financial backing to Johnson Bros to enable them to buy the BATCo's No 2 mill at Woolgoolga. Sir Allen was an indefatigable report writer. The following is an extract from one of his reports to his Board of Directors, held in the Allen Taylor & Co archives at the ANU, Canberra.

He records that Saxton and Sons "*lost thousands of pounds over the GNT venture.*" This could indicate that Saxton, as a major shareholder, may also have been a director.

The GNT was a victim of WW1 and its timing was exquisitely unfortunate. The company invested heavily to set up one of the largest mills on the North Coast, constructed an

expensive logging tramway to serve it, and imported a brand-new American "Climax" loco to haul its log trains. The mill opened with great ceremony just before war was declared with Claude Gibbons as managing director. The export hardwood trade to England and Europe collapsed overnight, and six weeks later the mill closed. It re-opened in August 1916 but went into liquidation in August 1917. Peter's GNT employment was during 1916-17 and if his recollection was good, then Saxton was manager during this latter period.

Northern Tour by Sir Allen Taylor and Dr. Robertson in connection with the North Coast Steam Navigation Company, 30/9/1919 to 8/10/1919:

Johnson's Mill, Woolgoolga.

Inspected the site. Seems to be well laid out and working satisfactorily. General shortage of logs. They were cutting small spankers there thereby producing unsatisfactory timber. Mill site is about 1 mile from the wharf (old B.A.T. property) which means handling of timber from mill to jetty is costing 12/6d per 1000 super feet.

Woolgoolga.

The amount of money used in this proposal is far in excess of estimated requirements for example when our Chairman was in the district some months ago. Mr. A. Johnson stated he would only require about £2,500 whereas the amount invested in mill buildings bullock teams timber rights and other land which was necessary to complete the concern is £5276.8.0. This mill is operating now but owing to the drought which prevents the teams from working there is a shortage of logs.

The class of timber being produced is good but I am of the opinion, owing to the high prices being paid for logs, this proposition cannot be worked successfully. There is great opposition in the district from Saxton & Sons who buy a large quantity of logs and who have teams and other interests in the district, while Langley Bros. and others are also purchasing logs. When at Woolgoolga I was given to understand the price of logs increased to the extent of from 1/- to 2/- per 100 super feet according to the kind required. Unless something can be done to bring about uniform prices so far as log buyers are concerned this mill cannot be worked successfully. I suggested to Mr. Johnson that we try to dispose of it to Saxton & Sons even at cost and if successful it would release a considerable amount of capital which could be utilized in solidifying the position on the Glenreagh side.

Owing to the fact that Saxton & Sons lost thousands of pounds in this district over the Great Northern Mill venture our chances of inducing them to buy are remote but it might be worth trying. If a sale cannot be affected then a strong effort should be made and pressure brought to bear to enable Johnson Bros. to get their logs on a satisfactory basis. Unfortunately the Shipping Companies do not assist us in this centre as much as they might. They are bringing logs away that others are buying and giving the sawn timber at Woolgoolga scanty attention. Woolgoolga is an open roadstead and logs can be handled much quicker than sawn which very often induces the steamer to give first consideration to log cargoes. The capital invested in the Woolgoolga proposition comprises the following:

Timber Rights £645 , Special Land Purchase £280 , Bullock Teams secured by mortgage £1805.10.5,
Mill Site £515, Mill Plant Buildings etc £1928.17.9 , Sundries £100 , Total: £5274.8.2
