

Ron Rediger Reflects on His Life in the Bush

Written by Don Clinch, August 2013

Ron was born in South Grafton on the 22nd of May, 1924. He came home to live his early life with his family at Rediger Close, Halfway Creek. Father Henry 'Sam' Rediger was a teamster and bush worker, and had three bullock teams, each 14-16 bullocks. Dad passed on years of experience to Ron and so he was born to the bush, grew up in the bush and spent all of his working life in the bush.

Early entertainment at Halfway Creek consisted of dances in the local hall, card parties, a race course on Kungala Rd and creek fishing. There were no babysitters for children so you took them to dances with pillows and blankets and put them to sleep on the floor under the bench-type seats on which you were sitting. But there could be a diversion at the dances. There were two local families which were in dire conflict. If one was at the dance and the other turned up, all the rest of the people left the hall, waited outside until they settled their differences, then the dance got underway again.

So it was no coincidence that Ron commenced working for the Forestry Commission of NSW in 1945, mostly, but not exclusively, at Barcoongere State Forest which was not all that far from Rediger Close. He worked for the Commission for 45 years. After 25 years in its employ he received service recognition; after 35 years a certificate for having served 'with no lost time'.

Part of his job was as roving foreman in all forests in the Coffs Harbour and Eastern Dorrigo areas, supervising railway sleeper cutting and the squaring of girders from the large trees available at that time, and any other operations related to timber-getting in the State Forests. In 1957 Ron was supervising 87 sleeper cutters working in his allotted area. He rotated the cutters in the forest so that standing timber was harvested at 10 year intervals and at the end of the 10 year period they returned to find the regeneration had provided more usable logs than were there when they started.

Barcoongere State Forest was estimated to be between 4000 and 5000 acres, one thousand of which was devoted to a compartmented pine plantation, the rest being natural eucalypts and other local species. The project started in 1950 with 40 permanent positions. At its peak employment there were 87 men involved. The project was "closed down" in 1970, though regrowth pine continued to be harvested due to the increase in demand and price. Of all those employees, there remains but five alive by April 2013.

Ron Rediger and Clarrie Winkler (still alive) also served as Rangers to patrol the forest, particularly at weekends.

Barcoongere Forest was supplied with a huge fire engine, a 24 cylinder La France, which had been used on an aerodrome during World War 2. It is still in working order in private ownership.

The Commission had a number of on-site dwellings in the forest itself, including Barcoongere, Homigan's Flat west of Woolgoolga, in Newfoundland State Forest. In addition, it had fire lookout towers at Barcoongere, Brown's Knob, Nobby west of Woolgoolga, Mount Coramba and Glenugie Peak.

After marriage Ron and wife Rae lived in the Barcoongere cottage for seven years. The need for education of their two daughters, Elizabeth- Anne and Corrinne, prompted their shift to Woolgoolga where they have lived ever since.

Bullocks were the only means available to bring trees to log dumps and sites used for sleeper cutting, until 1957 when another pioneer bushman and teamster, Jock Blackadder, and the Marshall brothers introduced crawler tractors to work in the bush.

Logs were also supplied to the large mills in town for general purpose milling. As time went on there were also a number of bush mills which processed logs on site, and sawn timber was delivered straight from the bush.

It's impossible to work in the bush without getting involved with bushfires. And Ron was in the thick of it. One of his colleagues put it all in twenty four words; "Ron is like an old firehorse; he can sniff a blaze miles away and he knows what to do when he gets there". The Commission made him Controller of its bushfire gangs. In every year of his service there was a fire or were fires of some sort or other –including some very big ones - despite his reduction programmes to minimise fuel and fire hazard beginning in July each year. Three of his men were killed in 1968 when a burnt-out tree fell over a bulldozer that was taking them to start another day of firefighting.

In 1957, a Royal Navy helicopter attached to a Marine Survey vessel anchored off Red Rock, crashed on Brown's Knob trig site in Newfoundland State Forest north of Barcoongere. During the crash the helicopter was thrown off the side of the site and lodged on a small ledge. The ship's Captain suffered severe life threatening injuries and was trapped inside and unable to move from the helicopter's cabin. There were no access roads and because of Ron Rediger's intimate knowledge of the forest, he was stationed at the control point on two way radio, to guide the ground party under Senior Constable Cec W Marsh to the scene. As part of the rescue effort, a forked tree was felled, trimmed, and mounted on the front of a bulldozer to make a "V" shaped "blade" to push a track through the bush for the ambulance to get close to the area below the ledge. The Captain survived, and the local Woolgoolga doctor, Major C G Harper, was awarded an MBE by the Queen for his exceptional performance in the rough bush country. The motor and instruments were salvaged from the smashed helicopter, but the frame is still at the base of Brown's Knob.

Ron and Rae have warm memories of a rather unique association struck up with a migrant who came to Barcoongere as a sleeper cutter. Jonas Zilinskas had been an acrobat and strongman in a circus in Lithuania before coming to Australia and choosing Barcoongere as a place to settle. He became known as "Johno" and lived a bit of a solitary life in a camp made of nondescript materials gathered at random. The only "convenience" was a kerosene refrigerator, free-standing at the rear (or was it the front, or perhaps on one side!) of his dwelling in which he kept milk and bananas. He was exceptionally strong and was often seen to lift up a 44 gallon drum of diesel fuel from the ground to a truck tray. He would walk to Woolgoolga (about 15 miles or 25km) and back if needed. "Johno" designed and had made what became known as a swing saw which was especially useful for cutting sleepers, girders and sawn timber by mechanical means instead of using axes and broadaxes and crosscut saws. Ron and Rae cemented a lifetime friendship with "Johno" who operated from 1953 to 1958, when he returned to the circus life with Ashton's Circus, with which he stayed until retirement in quite recent times. When working in the bush he wore a hat and blucher boots – nothing else! There was no passing traffic, no local roads: no need for anything else! Ron often acted as interpreter for "Johno" especially in medical matters and other important occasions. "Johno" was somewhat religious and whilst at Barcoongere made numerous sculptures inspired by his faith. There were many of these, but his most famous work was his life size statue of a man standing on top of a large tree stump.

"Johno" was a staunch and honourable friend, loved the area, and came back to spend his retirement at Joyce Blackadder's property at Corindi. He had gained such respect as a circus performer with Ashtons that when he decided to return to his homeland in 2007, Nicki Ashton drove over to Perth to be company for him on the trip back to Lithuania. He had a long white beard, and as he boarded the plane, he wept to such a degree that his tears fell off the bottom of his beard.

"Johno" died only recently on 26 July 2013.

Probably the highlight of Ron's forestry career came in 1970 when he was included in the party which was in charge of the arrangements for the Queen's visit to the Bruxner Park Lookout, above Coffs Harbour. His knowledge of the forest was used, and he was also given the job to guard and care for the Queen's Rolls Royce.

Ron had another unique experience in 1970. A perfectly flat forested area known as 'Melbourne Plains', about 2km north east of the Halfway Creek truck stop, was part of Ron's regular patrol area. In 1970, Newcastle had its devastating earthquake. On his next patrol, about a week after the Newcastle event, Ron found the ground had opened up about 15m wide, about 6m in depth, for a distance of just under 3km, at 'Melbourne Plains'

and in that new 'gully' were lodged huge dead trees which must have been forced up from below. There had been no rain which might have uncovered them, and the only conclusion could be that 'Melbourne Plains' had its own earthquake too: somehow associated with the Newcastle disturbance. However, there were no recordings at the Meteorological Bureau of anything occurring locally. Quite a mystery.

He was also part of the crew put together by Professor Neil Yeates (Woolgoolga's famed historian) to erect a memento at the Woolgoolga Art Gallery for the Bicentenary Celebrations. It was a record of the timber getting days, placed on the site of the British Australia Timber Company tramline which brought timber from the forests west of town to Woolgoolga Jetty. The rail truck, tramlines and other jetty material were supplied by Coffs Harbour City Council and assembled at the Forestry Commission workshop. A group from local timber millers, engineers, haulier people, and others related to the industry erected the exhibit which includes a huge tallowwood log from Barcoongere, in a prominent position near the Gallery in Turon Parade.

Of course Ron knows a wonderful series of stories to tell about history. But here's just one. Part of the export of local produce was the transport of pigs by ship from Woolgoolga Jetty. They were kept in a pen on land, and then taken out to load the ship when it turned up at the end of the jetty. There were always a lot of onlookers as ships were being loaded, and on this occasion they included the Reverend Bradley, the Anglican Minister from Coffs Harbour. Another was a well-known aboriginal, Johnny McCallum from Corindi. One of the pigs went over the side into the ocean, and Johnny decided to jump in and rescue it. The Reverend McCallum farewelled him with the words: "The Lord be with you Johnny". When Johnny surfaced dragging the pig by the front leg, he responded with the words: "the pig be with me Reverend".

Ron also played a significant part in harvesting hardwood seed from the forests to send to South America, where they did very well. It was a real success story, with the seed branches from the trees being brought to the ground by severing them from the tree by 22 rifle fire.

Ron Rediger knows about aboriginal superstition. Another famous local aborigine, Jimmy Runner, was in terror of thunder and lightning, and if a storm came when he was in the bush he would find a hollow log and back up inside it to protect himself from the wrath of the skies. All you could see was his face and terrified white eyes until the storm had passed.

Apart from a lifetime collection of photos, Ron has a collection of 30 beautiful poster sized prints of forestry related subjects which he cherishes. They would make a great and unique forestry exhibit in any museum.

Another prized possession is a folio of letters of historic matter relating to Woolgoolga written by Senior Constable Cec Marsh, Verdi Schwinghammer and others, collected by daughter Corrinne as a school project some years ago.

Ron and Rae have always found time to share civic responsibility. Ron speaks quietly of his service on the committees which organised the arrival of the first subsidised Doctor and a permanent Ambulance Service at Woolgoolga. He's a life member of the Art Gallery and "Meals and Wheels" at which he spent 26 years as President or Vice President. He was President of the P & C Association for 17 years and spent 37 years as Returning Officer for State and Federal Elections. Rae has a 50 years' service medal for the Girl Guides, membership of the CWA, Mothers' Club and "Meals on Wheels".

And of course, there are the grandchildren.

Wood is in Ron Rediger's blood, so he spends some of his retirement turning wood into objects of great beauty. He has the advantage of knowing all about every timber specification and how to get the best out of its grain. Rae has an interest in all wifely and motherly and grandmotherly things, and supports Ron's efforts to grow cliveas in the home garden.

By any measure Ron has made a most significant contribution to the development of forestry in the region and the Woolgoolga community.