

THE AJAX TIMBER MILL

We stood there my mother and I in the headmaster's office as he took details for my enrolment to grade four at East Kew Central School.

"Father's employment?" (a short silence).

"He has none".

"Well what did he do before."

"Owner of a Timber Mill".

"Well maybe he will do this again", the headmaster said brusquely.

How easy it is to say something like that without knowing any of the circumstances! For four months after our arrival in Australia in November 1938 my father had trudged around looking for work. His law degree was not recognised, but in May 1939 he secured a job as cost accountant at a metal ware factory in Kensington. His total weekly earnings were only \$10 a week of which \$7 went on house rental. When Stephan Strasser a family friend from Vienna arrived, they hit upon the idea of forming a business partnership.

My mother wrote in her diary that by November 1939 of that year Stephan and my father had bought a saw-mill. Stephan as the expert and my father as the financier. Later it became evident that one was not expert enough and the other had insufficient funds. The second World War had broken out in August 1939 but it was not until the entrance of the Japanese that it effected the business. This, as well as other effects resulted in the business collapsing. My parents lost not only their own money but the entire inheritance that had been left to my mother after the death of her father in April 1941. My mother had never imagined that it was possible to lose money so quickly, with what appeared to be an honest and seemingly sound business proposition. To save the name Ajax Timber Mill my father sold his share to a prosperous mill. All that remained was the bush in Buxton. While my father decided to work this bush, Stephan who had kept his share in another company withdrew. Although my father struggled on working very hard, he couldn't recover the debts. His tractor and the two trucks often broke down.

The beautiful drive to Buxton and the timber -mill stands out clearly in the fragments of my recollections of those early years in Australia. The magnificence of the steep winding road up Black Spur with its gigantic eucalypts, abundance of ferns and dense undergrowth where one encountered little else on the road except for an occasional timber truck laden with huge logs. Buxton township consisted of only two buildings, the weatherboard hotel with its flaking green paint and the general store where everything from furniture to food was sold. At one side of the hotel was a

verandah leading to the bar, where hardened sunburnt men in their often torn and dirty clothes could always be found exchanging news over a glass of beer. My father often stayed overnight at the hotel but, as he didn't drink he would not have been welcome in this company. Surrounding the building was a paddock of green vegetables, while cows grazed along the edges of the plantation. Under the bridge over the road a clear stream flowed swiftly over the pebbles and rocks before disappearing into the forest.

As a child I was spared all the anxiety and grief surrounding the business. It was a special treat to be allowed to accompany my father. The timber mill situated a few kilometres from Buxton along the road to Acheron, was just excitement and fun. A long shelter housed the machinery for cutting the timber. The deafening noise of the machine as it was fed with fresh logs resounded all day long. Nearby stood 'the office', a roughly constructed wooden hut, complete with chimney, furnished only with a writing desk, a solitary chair and an old bed. Beside the hut flowed a little creek providing cool water for the workers and helping to make the blistering summer sun more bearable.

I loved watching the draught horses, their coats bathed in sweat as they pulled the freshly cut logs from the pile to within range of the machine's grasp, under the direction of the timber workers.

"Steady Ned".

"Woah Wally"

The commands rang out through the bush. When the horses were not working I was allowed to feed them and sometimes as a special treat climb on their backs.

When the noise and activity got too much for me I was free to follow the winding track into the bush. Sometimes I met one of the tractors with a newly felled log tagging behind it. All the lumbermen knew the boss's little daughter in her brown jodhpurs and spotted shirt the young girl who ambled along the bush tracks or waded in the creek, enjoying the novelty of the bush they took for granted. Occasionally a shout followed by a thud broke the silence as a tree fell to the forest floor awaiting the draught horses and the tractor to reclaim the log for the mill.

When I became tired I would stop and watch the highly skilled tree fellers standing side by side half way up the tree, stripped to the waist. They swung their axes alternately and rhythmically until the trunk was almost cut through. Then they climbed down and finished the job from the ground. They seemed to know exactly where the tree was going to fall.

The country workers were simple, friendly, easy going people. Haste or over exertion was not in their vocabulary. Their motto 'near enough is good enough'. They enjoyed nothing better than to boil the billy for a cuppa over a crackling fire and my father used to say if you let them they would have indulged in this pursuit all day. When it was time to drive the timber to the city, they always stopped at the Buxton Hotel for a glass of beer or two. If my father was unlucky, he would see the loaded truck still standing outside the pub five or six hours later.

The workers lived with their families in small wooden houses which contained just the bare necessities, electric light, gas stoves, telephones or even hot water were just dreams for them. Often their nearest neighbours would be several kilometres away. Each morning their children set out on foot or horseback along the dusty unmade road to attend the local school.

What sort of relationship did my father have with these employees and what did they actually think of this tall foreigner with the strange accent who knew so little about their way of life, or the Australian bush? Certainly my father could not understand their lack of motivation and willingness to work hard and they in turn took advantage of his lack of understanding of the timber industry.

By 1946 my father had obtained a position as a cellist in the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. During the May school holidays he drove up from Melbourne to visit us at Black Spur where my mother was renting a house. In those days there was no such thing as twenty-four hour petrol stations but it was not unheard of for my father to run out of petrol. This time he got as far as Healesville before realising he would never make it to the top of Black Spur. He remembered however that one of his former employees lived in the area who used to have petrol reserves and in a short time a large can of fluid had been poured into his petrol tank and the payment had been made. It was too late when my father discovered the fluid was water, it had already rotted his petrol tank. Was this a joke, did the employee have an old grievance to settle, or was it a genuine mistake? We will never know.

Years later we had occasion to drive past Buxton with my father. A rusting wire fence enclosed the remains of the saw mill, under its pitted roof various rusty pieces of machinery lay scattered. The office hut was intact except for broken windows, while nearby lay an old buggy half buried in the soil. Quiet and deserted it remained as a memorial to a failed enterprise.

I wondered what thoughts entered my father's mind. I felt so sorry for the hopes and plans which had ended in ashes. But greater was my feeling for my mother who had supported him through all the heartache and misfortune and who as the years progressed had to struggle from one economic crisis to another. (Source: unknown May 2006)