

ANDERSONS MILL CHILDHOOD MEMORIES 1931-1943

BY HAROLD KEMP

The four of us were huddled around the log fire. Outside, snow was falling. Dad went outside to get more wood but came back with a kookaburra, so cold it could not move. After a while, in the warm room, the bud began to shiver. It accepted a piece of meat but coughed it up. This incident is my earliest memory. I was two years old, my brother Max six months, my mother Ella twenty five and my father Bert thirty three. The year was 1933.

We lived in a simply built, unpainted timber house in a tiny sawmill settlement. There was no electricity. Water was collected by bucket from a small wooden watercourse that ran from a mountain stream down past several houses. Alongside the house was a dug-out covered with roofing iron and dirt. Downhill were a handful of other houses and several one-roomed huts for single men. Further down, the mill sheltered the huge saws that screamed every few minutes as they cut boards from the logs. Power for the saws came from a steam engine fuelled by waste timber. Close to our house was an open chute down which the trunks of trees rushed at frightful speed from the mountain far above.

The mill was four miles from the township of Marysville in North Eastern Victoria. Just before Christmas 1934, one of the few car owners at the mill drove all four of us into Marysville for shopping. I became interested in the operation of the door catch and, when we picked up a hitchhiker, I placed my right forefinger on the striker plate I reasoned that my finger would feel how the catch was working and I planned to withdraw it before it jammed. A prominent scar remains as a permanent reminder of this childish experiment.

Occasionally, Dad would mention that a wombat had gone into our dug-out. Max and I would peer into the dark interior and wonder about the wombat, but were too afraid to walk in to see if he was still there. The terrible bushfires of 1939 destroyed the whole mill settlement and our dug-out saved several people. Others were not so lucky. Several men were caught on a patch of bare ground near the mill while trees blazed all around them. Lying on their stomachs to protect their faces from the radiation, they had to endure the roasting of their backs.

We moved to Alexandra to live in 1935, so we missed the fires, but a survivor of the Marysville fire recuperated with us. His back was charred black and had grooves deep and wide enough to contain a childish finger. Max and I liked Mr Blackwood because he spent time talking to us. He described how his father came to Australia, aged only fourteen, he was at a wharf near his

home in Scotland, looking at a ship, when the captain invited him to join the crew. Without informing his parents, he went aboard and sailed to Australia. His parents never found out what had happened to him. Once or twice, he thought of writing but never got around to it. Mr Blackwood told us of his own schooldays in Australia: much time was spent on the alphabet, which had to be learned backwards as well as forwards. The teacher would ask such questions as, "Ham Blackwood, recite the alphabet backwards starting at p!". Max and I laughed to hear Mr Blackwood recite the alphabet backwards, and learned to do it ourselves.

Dad's work was cutting down trees for the sawmill; his main tools were axes and a crosscut saw six feet long. The work was arduous in the extreme, but he loved the bush and was proud of his ability to complete nearly double the usual amount of work each day. He said the reason for his superior output was the great care he took in sharpening his tools. He tested his axe by shaving hair from his leg. In the timber industry, men who cut down trees were called 'fallers' and they spoke of 'falling' a tree. They never 'felled' a tree as the dictionary has it.

Our house in Alexandra was timber with a corrugated iron roof. The interior of the two bedrooms and the lounge were lined with hessian covered with wallpaper. The timber floors were covered with lino. The bathroom was unlined. In the summer, Max and I slept on the back veranda. Later on, a two-roomed shed was built in the back yard; one room was used for tools, the other was the laundry. A paddock attached to the house block was the home of our cow. The cow was a pet as well as the supplier of milk, cream and butter.

The laundry contained two concrete troughs and a 'copper'. The copper was a cast iron frame with a copper vessel in the top part and a fire compartment in the lower part. The clothes were boiled with soapy water while being stirred occasionally with a wooden stick. The stick was then used to transfer the clothes to a trough, where they were drained, rinsed with cold water, wrung out by twisting, and then dumped in the second trough where they were treated with Reckitt's blue to remove the yellow colour from white materials. After a second wringing, the clothes were hung out to dry. The line was raised and lowered by means of a notched wooden pole called the 'clothes prop'. This procedure was unsuitable for clothes that were coloured with non-fast dyes; these were rubbed with soap and warm water on a slab of corrugated glass in a wooden frame - a device known as a scrubbing board. All of this took Mum several hours of exhausting work every Monday morning. Later on, the purchase of a roller-wringer made the washing easier: The clothes were fed between two spring-loaded rollers, which squeezed out the water when a

crank-handle was turned by hand. Mum ironed the clothes on the kitchen table using flatirons which were heated on the top of the wood stove.

In the kitchen, the most prominent feature was the wood stove, fuelled with lengths of split wood. The top of the stove served as hotplates; the oven was below the firebox. Hot air controlled by baffles was directed around the oven when it was in use. The oven had hot spots, so cakes and scones had to be moved around for even cooking. The fire door was opened for making toast in front of the glowing coals. In winter the stove warmed the kitchen. When it was very cold, we would sit in front of the stove and put our feet in the oven.

Dad ate breakfast at 5am - fried eggs, fried bacon, and toast spread with butter or dripping. (In those days all of our diets were high in fat and doubtless contributed to much heart disease). Dad returned from work about 6pm, but at times he stayed in the bush all of the week. At the weekends, he cut wood for the house, looked after the large vegetable garden, or worked falling trees for sale as firewood. The palms of his hands were as hard and stiff as boards and black from timber stains. At night, he read until 11pm. He needed little sleep.

In our bathroom was a galvanized iron bath on legs and a dish on a stand. A bath demanded a fair amount of work. First, wood was collected and the fire lit under the copper in the laundry. When the water was hot, it was carried by bucket to the bath. Max and I had one bath each week, which we shared after a fight to decide whose turn it was to sit in the deep end. Each night, we gave ourselves a "big wash" hands, face, knees and feet in a dish of warm water.

The toilet was, for good reason, a long walk from the house and without light or sewerage. The path to it was dark and overhung with trees. As Max and I believed in ghosts, and were scared of the dark, the trek to the toilet was terrifying at night.