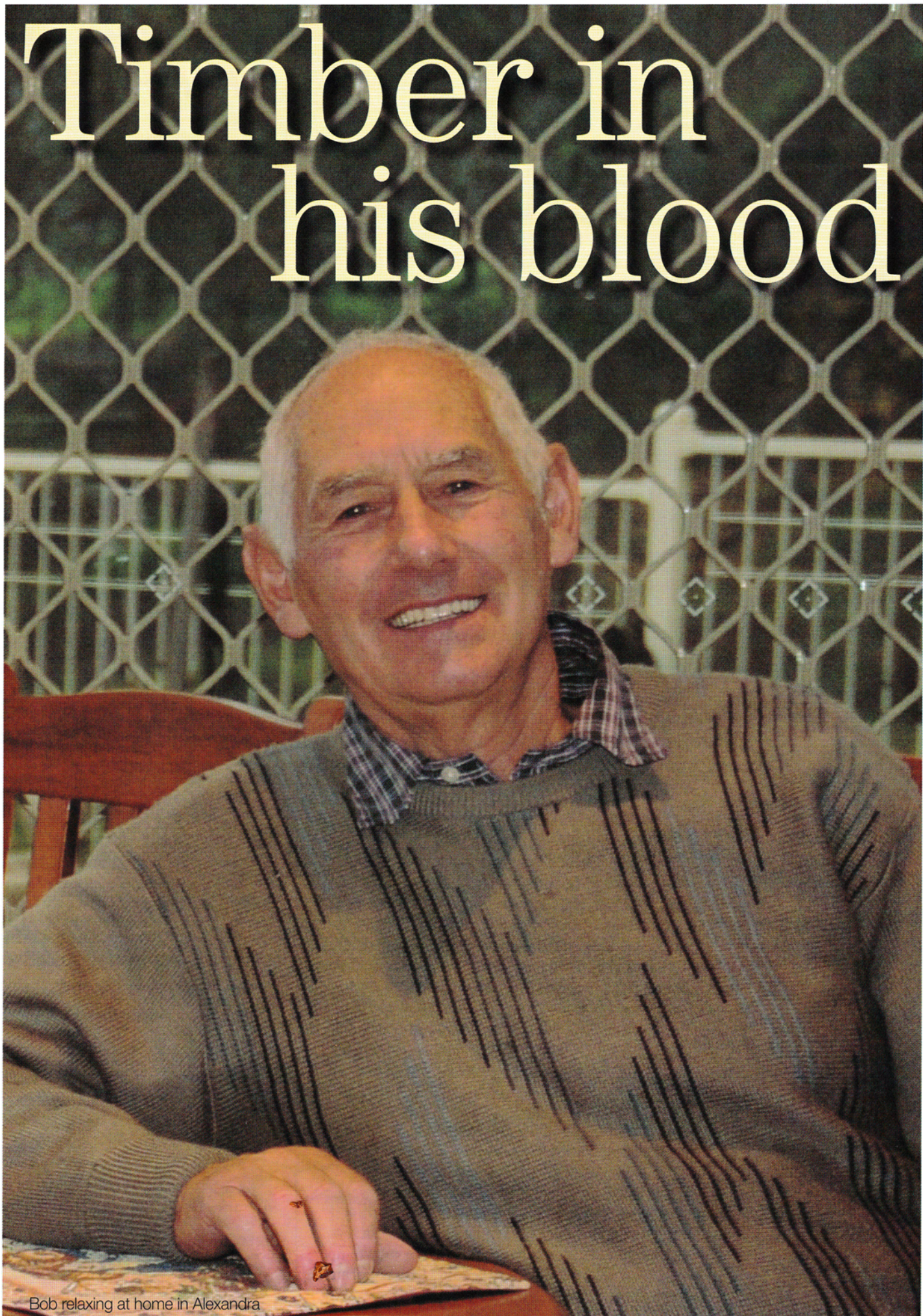




Bob relaxing at home in Alexandra

Bob Gale worked in the timber industry most of his working life. Now happily retired and living in Alexandra, he tells his story to JULIA FOLETTA



The logging village Bob remembers

The world was a very different place when Bob Gale was growing up. It was the 1940s and he lived the first 14 years of his life in a bush timber mill settlement about six kilometres out of Marysville. These were the days when small timber mill settlements had sprung up in the bush around the Taggerty, Buxton, Marysville, Rubicon, Cambarville and Narbethong districts to process native hardwoods.

Anderson's Number 2 mill, where Bob spent his early days, was one of the mills that survived the 1939 fires.

Over time the mills moved into the towns; two in Narbethong were lost in the 2009 fires and by 2010 all mills in the region, including Alexandra's, which had been the major employer for the area, had closed.

Bush sawmills were like little communities – there were houses, workers quarters, a timber mill, an oval and usually a small rural school with one teacher taking classes to year eight.

Bob Gale remembers his early home well. There were five mill houses built from green rough sawn boards which shrank as they dried, leaving draughty gaps. The inside was 'plastered' with layers of flour, water and newspaper then finished with a brown paper layer. Bob's mother Masie then added a decorative touch with a kalsomine wash dabbed on with a sponge.

There was a very small kitchen, dining area, lounge room with brick fireplace and a chimney made from roofing iron. His parents had one bedroom while his two sisters shared the other, leaving Bob to tough it out in a small sleepout on the back verandah. Twice weekly baths were taken with water from the wood fired ►



Left: The home Bob grew up in

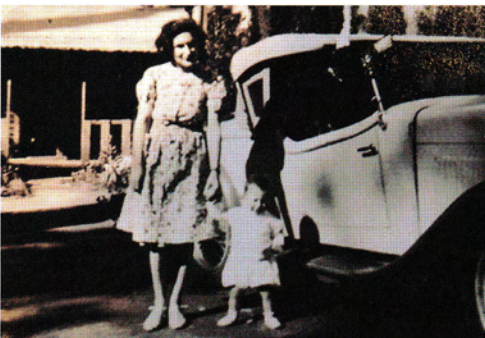
Top to bottom:

Bob with one of his haulage trucks

Bob and his mum Maisie outside their home

Crossing the river with a full load

Bob and another of his haulage trucks



copper. The toilet was a long drop dunny out the back.

"Mum cooked with a Lux wood stove. It was very primitive, but from our point of view it was a palace, because it was warm in the winter time and we had plenty of food. She had a beautiful flower garden and grew what vegetables she could," Bob says.

"Mum ran the boarding house for the mill workers – they'd come in for lunch and tea."

At an evening, the family had to be resourceful. "There was no electricity and at night we'd sit around the radio with a six volt battery on the floor listening to 'Biggles' and 'Pick-a-Box' and those sorts of things," Bob says.

"Before we got our Silent Night kerosene refrigerator, all we had was an ice chest, and before that a Coolgardie with damp hessian to keep things cool. Timber tuck driver Jack Brenda would bring a large ice block from Healesville wrapped in the top of the ice box. This was placed in the top of the ice box. We were made when we got the Silent Night!" Bob recalls.

Toys were few. Bob had a scooter and later a pushbike and toys he invented from discarded machinery parts.

Wilkes Creek School, about one and a half kilometres from Number 2 mill, serviced about eight to 10 school-aged children from three bush timber mills. Getting to school along the bush track wasn't much fun, especially in winter.

When the post war migrants arrived, student numbers swelled to about 18 or 19.

"The school's gone now, but we had a reunion in 2008 and 36 came back which was pretty good," Bob says.

"I went and found all the stumps and the brick fireplace. We have a rock there now with a plaque, probably three miles

down the road and a mile into the bush. The school was at the bottom of Mount Bismarck," Bob says.

"We'd get four to six inches of snow in the winter, probably lasting for about a fortnight and every now and then we'd get a heavy fall."

Bob was the third generation of his family to be involved in logging and he has seen many changes. His grandfather Jack used horses and bullocks at Anderson's mills to operate steam winches and lowering gear. Bob's father, also Bob, worked with Anderson's as a tree feller and tractor driver.

Bob's career in timber began at age 14 as a 'swampie' assisting his tractor driving father to snig out, then load logs onto the tramline trolleys.

"They didn't have a blade on the tractor then. Say there was a log where you couldn't get in far enough with the tractor, the swampie would pull the wire rope through to the log, put the wire stop around the log, hook it on and then the tractor would pull it out."

Bob's early days as a swampie were cut short when one of the log trolleys on the timber tramway ran over and broke his leg. The break did not heal well and Bob got a less strenuous job as a pot walloper (general kitchen hand) at Marysville's Koorunga Guest House. Any hopes of joining a football team were dashed.

Itching to get back into the bush, at age 16 Bob returned to his swampie role and general bush duties, this time in the Big River area for J L (Lloyd) Gould. Not happy unless he had a steering wheel in his hand, at 17 Bob learnt to drive the ex-army Ford Blitz, loading logs destined for Warburton and beyond. In those days a licence wasn't needed to drive on forest roads.

With a couple of exceptions, Bob's ►



Left: Bob and Ann's wedding day

Bottom left: Ann in their Alexandra home



Brothers who were taking Mountain Ash and Stringybark logs out of Mount Beauty and Gelantipy near Buchan.

Time had come to break into business on his own and Bob traded in his near new 1959 Holden on a tip truck and spent the next two years carting gravel to resurface the roads on the Reefton Spur and the Yarra Track.

His log carting career began in earnest after converting the tip truck to a timber jinker. He joined Dick Peter's team carting logs for the Matlock sawmill then, as a contractor to Lloyd Gould, he carted Mountain Ash and Messmate logs from Big River and Mount Margaret into Gould's Marysville mill.

Over the years Bob's fleet of trucks grew to four, carting logs into and processed timber out of JL Gould's Marysville and Alexandra sawmills.

Tiring of the pressure of business Bob sold his four trucks to Gould in 1990.

Bob's faithful drivers were Graham Weinberg, Leigh Bantick, Bill Pritchett and Andy Friedel.

But it wasn't long before Bob hankered for another truck. He bought himself a brand new Volvo and spent the next year travelling to and from the Sydney markets pulling a refrigerated van loaded with fresh vegetables from Wandin.

But that took him too far from home. Soon he was back in the bush and spent a further nine years driving with a logging syndicate for J L Gould Sawmills

before giving the game up for good in 2000.

"I love the bush, it's just part of me," Bob says.

JL Gould Sawmills in Alexandra was sold to ITC Timber in 2006 then to Gunns Timber Products in 2009 and ceased operation in 2010. Many jobs were lost and timber harvested from the district is now transported to Heyfield in Gippsland. JL Gould's Marysville mill had closed in 1995.

Bob believes the Alexandra mill should never have closed. "Many good people lost their jobs and it was a real blow to the economy of the town," he says.

He's seen many changes in the industry over time – in the forest, in the log yard, with safety practices and mechanical equipment.

"We used a Trehwella jack to jack each log off the truck, but now they lift the whole load off in one with a forklift. Down at APM or Midway, they just put the forks under it and lift 30 odd tonne of logs off in one hit," Bob says.

"When I first started driving for Lloyd he owned the sawmill in Healesville and I was carting greasy gum. In those days to release the logs you had to knock a pin out of the chock on the bolsters as hard as you could and run like buggery to get out of the way as they rolled out over parallel logs (skids) laid on the ground to keep the logs clean," Bob says.

"Fortunately that day they'd put new

association with Lloyd continued until his retirement.

"At 18 I got my licence and heavy vehicle endorsement and began carting logs out of the Marysville area to Robbie's mill near Buxton, owned by Lloyd Gould."

Then he worked for Marysville logging or cartage contractors Bantick




NEW PREMISES!

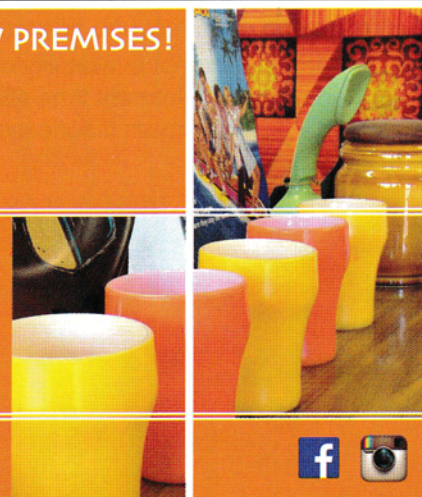
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"You can't learn those sorts of things at universities; you've got to grow up with them"

skids out because I knocked the pin out, then fell over flat between the skids – the log rolled right over the top of me!"

Roads have changed. "In the early days all we had was tracks, but these days they're not quite highways, but they are really beautiful roads," Bob says.

Management has changed too. "The Forest Officer was Jim Sherlock; he was in control of the bush and if you did the wrong thing you knew you were in trouble. I learnt everything from watching and doing it in the bush; you didn't need a book or go to school to learn what you did. You can't learn those sorts of things at universities; you've got to grow up with them," he says.

"When I first started swamping, the mud would be over your gumboots and you'd work in the snow. You're not allowed to work in the rain now.

"The trucks have changed so much too. In those days we just had 36 horse power trucks and now they have 600 horse power trucks, it's a big difference, B-doubles and all that.

"There's too much pressure now: we worked hard, but not with the same pressure. In the early days when we started with Lloyd we'd boil the billy, have a cup of tea, then go on the road. No time for that now!

"My mates were real mates – Alan Walker, Alan Graham, Billy Bekter, Ken 'Boots' McLeod – we all stuck together and you'd help one another along the road if you broke down.

"Up at Matlock we were camped in a tent and slept on those old beds made out of wire gates. The guys today mightn't survive, camping up there the way we did."

Meeting girls was very different too.

"From the age of 16 I was courting girls in Marysville. I used to knock round with Neville McKenzie and Brian Greator on a Friday night. McKenzies had a feeder bus that brought passengers from the Melbourne bus into Marysville from St Fillan. They might have 15 to 20 passengers and the rest would go on to Alexandra. We'd take them around the guest houses, drop them off and then we'd pick out the ones we thought would be alright. Later we'd go back to the guest house and try our luck!

"We'd stand outside Cumberland Guest House when there were dances and the owner, Geoff Cuzens, would come out and say 'come on you young bucks, get in there and sort the girls out'. Sometimes, if there were too many guys, he'd say 'move along, there are too many guys tonight'. They were great times, no drugs."

After being stood up by a girl he'd met on one of these occasions, Bob decided to ask out the girl's friend, Annette (Ann) Duval from St Leonards. Their first date was on November 6, Bob's 28th birthday. They were engaged a fortnight later and married on December 21. Bob was a busy young bloke, no time to muck around!

Some thought it wouldn't last, but 46 years, two daughters and six grandchildren later the marriage continues.

By 2008 living in Marysville had served its purpose so Bob and Ann sold their Falls Road home of 40 years. They moved into Alexandra where Ann could be closer to her quilting group, and Bob to his Freemasonry.

Bob's 94 year-old mum Masie is in Alexandra's Kellock Lodge; daughter Lana lives in Canberra with husband John Woollard, Alexandra's former health surveyor; Roslyn kept timber in the family by marrying Jason McKinnell of McKinnell Harvesting Pty Ltd, in Healesville. Grandson Jesse represents a fifth generation in timber. He works in the bush operating a fully mechanised timber harvester.

Today Bob and Ann's pride and joy is their HR Holden, the same model as Bob had when they were engaged.

And what truckie doesn't love country music? Ann shares this passion so each year they hitch up the caravan and head north for two weeks of country and western music at the annual Mildura Country Music Festival.

"On reflection maybe I could have done business a little better and had a bit more for our retirement. But buying the house in Alex was the best thing we've ever done. We're very happy here." **NNE**



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