



Mathoura's Timber Heritage

When the first white people arrived in the Mathoura district they found a very different landscape to what we see today.

The first visitor was the explorer Charles Sturt. By 1838 he was a grazier with a property near Goulburn and wanted to sell some cattle in Adelaide.

He also wanted to fill in a large gap on the map so he followed the Murray from the Albury district. He found the river fringed with open plains intersected with belts of trees, mostly at some distance from the river.

Reaching the place where the Edward flows out of the Murray near Picnic Point he encountered large reed beds and enough local flooding to convince him to cross to the southern bank of the Murray. Looking across the Edward

into the heart of what is now the Millewa forest he said the country was mostly open with more reed beds.

Three years later a squatter named Edward Curr settled on the Goulburn river close to Barmah. In his book *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria* he described his first look at the Murray, near where the Broken Creek joins the river upstream from Barmah. He said the river was flowing through a plain, adding that there were reed beds "as far in fact as the eye could reach."

He too was impressed by the open grasslands.

In 1842 Henry Lewes founded Moira station, south of Mathoura. He said the river flats were "mostly clear swamp." This is today's Moira forest.

Obviously there were fewer trees and more extensive wetlands than we have today.

Thousands of years of deliberate burning by the aboriginal inhabitants of the region had kept the trees well away from the river banks.

Within a few years there were squatters all along this section of the river, attracted by the open grasslands and permanent water.

With the aborigines no longer firing the land and squatters' stock grazing the flats, conditions were ideal for germination of the red gums seeds and they rapidly expanded into the forests we have today.

In 1859 the Deniliquin *Pastoral Times* recorded the first sawmill at work in the Mathoura district.

It was owned by Francis Cadell the riverboat pioneer and was used to cut red gum timber for a boundary fence between the pastoral leases of Mathoura and Moira.

Soon after this two mills began operating in the Gulpa Island section of the forests.

By the mid 1870s the construction of railway lines, particularly in Victoria, created a growing market for red gum sleepers.



Broadaxe sleeper cutters



Bullock team with big log.

Photo courtesy of M McBurnie

At first there was little regulation but by 1875 sections of the forests had been reserved and the NSW government appointed the state's first forest ranger, John Manton.

As he was to manage both the Millewa and Perricoota forest groups he was stationed in Moama. It was Manton's job to ensure that the timber cutters had permits and paid royalties on all the trees they felled.

Much of today's forest area had been settled in the 1870s by selectors. Small farms dotted Gulpa Island but their occupants fought a losing battle to keep the land clear of trees. Early in the 20th century most of the private land was resumed and incorporated into the forest reserves.

As settlement grew there was an increasing demand for construction timbers and the sawmills produced timber for houses, bridges, fences and wharves as well as the railway sleepers that were the industry mainstay.

By 1985 the forest managers were able to boast that over the previous 66 years the red gum forests had provided enough timber for 116,000 houses and sleepers for 8,000 kilometers of railway, predicting the same or better over the next 66 years "and indefinitely into the future." Almost half of those sleepers, a total of 5.5 million, were cut in the five years prior to 1948.

Living in Mathoura today are third- and fourth-generation descendants of the early timber workers. Their ancestors built and drove bullock wagons, felled huge trees using only axes and cross-cut saws and provided sawn timber which built those thousands of early homes as well as other vital infrastructure for a growing nation.

Today's generation is justly proud of this heritage.

The waste timber, too small for sleepers, provided fuel for the mills and the riverboats. The Deniliquin & Moama Railway Company used it instead of coal to run its trains and to pump water from the Gulpa creek for its locomotives.

The D & M provided local mills with access to distant markets and the durable timber was soon being used as props and to line tunnels in the underground gold mines, particularly in Bendigo. As Mathoura grew a strong bond was forged between town and forest. It was an unwritten rule that, if fire broke out, tradesmen and businessmen dropped what they were doing and went out to fight the flames, repaying the forest for its bounty.

Even at play the township maintained that link. Local sports meetings featured wood chopping events, one of the most popular the Tradesmen's Chop which attracted entrants who did not earn their living in the forest but were able to swing an axe.

And when the town's main mill burnt down in 1916, two local merchants, the Douglas brothers, built a new mill to replace it, keeping the town employed.

Researched and written by David Joss for the Mathoura Visitor Information and Business Centre

Sources: A History of the Millewa Group of River Red Gum Forests by Peter Donovan. Published by NSW State Forests; Galleries of Pink Galahs published by Shire of Murray; various editions of Deniliquin Pastoral Times, Melbourne Argus, and Echuca Riverine Herald, articles published by Charles Sturt, Recollections of Squatting in Victoria by Edward M Curr

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