

Skipper Armitage — A Fraser Island Legend

This FIDO Backgrounder 55 tells the story of Skipper Armitage, a colourful characters of the early Fraser Island timber industry. His association with Fraser Island extended over almost 50 years. In his 32 page autobiography, “Reminiscences of a Queensland Pioneer”, published in 1926, this very articulate and observant entrepreneur recalls some of his observations of Fraser Island that are re-published here.

Edward E Armitage was known almost universally as “Skipper. He had a long association with the Fraser Island in the timber industry, cutting and hauling timber. He had a fleet consisting of a 100 ft steam launch the “Geraldine”, a barge and a punt, plying between Fraser Island' and Maryborough. He lived to over 90 years of age. He was a very tall, wiry, spry man who had remarkable durability. Skipper had all but one of his own teeth until death in the late '90's; he never used a toothbrush, but always rinsed his teeth after eating anything.

Armitage was born in Dublin on 9th June 1848 and, as a four year old, moved with his family to Melbourne during the gold rushes. He arrived in 1852 and recalls seeing during his early teens a meteor land in Dandenong Road that he described as, “ lump of pure iron, weight 6 tons ... 3 ½ feet long and 2 ½ feet in diameter.” He had the meteorite pulled out of the ground where it had fallen and sent to the Melbourne Museum using several bullock teams.

In 1864 as a 16 year old, he followed his brother to Maryborough “where there were 200-300 people comprising timber getters.” It was only a year after the first logs had been taken from Fraser Island and before the discovery of gold in Gympie (1867) and only two decades since Maryborough was established.

On arriving in Maryborough I joined a party of timber getters of whom my brother was now the leading spirit. The timber then grew in the virgin scrubs and forests on the banks of the rivers and creeks, the haulage being so short that only snigging chains and block wheeled trolleys were needed. I once cut a pine tree mast for a vessel not far from where Walkers Ltd. stands now. It was all scrub then. No one dreamed even of roads or bridges let alone railways. The wild primeval bush was everywhere, and we went where we liked, worked at anything that would give us a living. Lonely pioneers generally welcomed a new face as a sign of a growing and improving settlement.”

The next three years were lean while the young Ned Armitage humped his bluey from station to station looking for work “at any wages”. But then in 1867 the young man who had arrived in Australia as a young child during the Victorian gold rushes saw another gold rush at Gympie. He however resisted the temptations of taking his chances at the diggings and continued a series of adventures including an encounter with Queensland's only real bush-ranger, the Wald Scotsman and a duel with a tribal Aborigine at Grahams Creek (near Maryborough). He survived the latter and was honoured as a Bunda, (white member) of the Wide Bay tribe.

Armitage certainly had a close affinity with the local Aboriginal people. His interest in natives and ability to decipher their language was widely admired. We are indebted to him for recording and translating some of Butchulla ceremonies. He kept detailed diaries and written records that are still preserved in the family. He was efficient and expected the same from his associates.

He described the cultural richness of the Aborigines and noted that although they had no written language “they have preserved in their campfire songs and corroborees very

accurate memories of historic events one hundred and sixty years ago.... Composing songs the blacks have no idea of rhyme or metre; it is simply prose set to music, but their sense of tune and time is perfect ... They have a very correct ear for harmony ... He documented an Aboriginal account celebrating what was believed to be the passing of the “Endeavour” in 1770 preserved in a corroboree. “The canoe (ship) rose up out of the sea like smoke or cloud (same word means both or either); one day it came in very close to “Takky wooroo” (Indian Head) and they saw many men walking about on it. They asked each other who were these strangers, and where were they going? The ship was sailing toward the dangerous sand shoal (Thoorvour or Breaksea Spit) and the blacks raised shouts of warning. When very near the shoal the ship saw it and turned away and quickly and went far away and then went down into the sea like sand crabs.

In 1874 after further wanderings including work in the Cardwell rainforest s where he contracted malaria, Armitage returned to Maryborough when he then married. He was then 26 years old. Although he continued to travel extensively he was then permanently based on Maryborough. He joined the cedar and pine logging on Mt Bopple (sic) and along the Mary River.

A dry season prevented me getting down to any (logs) market the first year (1874), but the next year more than made up for it. A big flood came in February. I then had over 2,000 logs on the river, the flood carried many of them down the river as far as the sea, but most of them were washed upon to the farms and scrubs along the river, and gave me five extra months work with a party of three men and a team of bullocks to get them hauled back into the river and down to the sawmills.

Armitage became manager of a sawmill at Mungar at £3 per week, which employed 62 men. He reorganized the mill and constructed a railway. This was still years before the Queensland Government started the railway line between Maryborough and Gympie in 1879. However the QG railway ultimately led to the closure of the Mungar sawmill. However he describes how he was inspired to build his railway line for timber haulage

Mr. William Sim, the local head of Pettigrew and Coy's mills at Dundathu, had already shown that a very cheap line of wooden rails could be usefully employed for the carriage of log timber in places where team haulage was too costly either be reason of distance or for the want of grass to feed the teams. He built a wooden railway at Tin Can Bay, about nine miles long, used a light locomotive to haul the timber trucks, and made it a marked success of it. (the Cooloola Tramway) (Sims) was unfortunately killed by an accident on his own railway in 1874.

The success Armitage's railway was acknowledged in 1928 when he described the locomotive steam engine he constructed, “It is still running, though it is 43 years since it was built. It has for many years past been working as a winding engine at Hyne and Sons sawmills in Maryborough, and it does all the hauling up and down between the mill and the shipping wharf (hauling logs punted from Fraser Island).”

Having left the sawmill Armitage went into business. In recalling the size of timber taken from Fraser Island in 1922 Walter Petrie noted that *"In 1878, Armitage cut six logs from a Yidney scrub giant. ... Bristow and Dempster hauled all but the butt log (10 feet 4 inches diameter)..."* This might have been the beginning of Armitage's Fraser Island association.

In 1929 Armitage described the forests of Fraser Island as he first saw them, *"The traveller strikes a 'living wall' of giant timber trees up to 150 feet high, buried in jungle — scrubs so thickly growing that roads or tracks must be cut to enable one to get through, great piles 100 to 120 feet clear to the first limb, are there in thousands..."*

Dear old Mother Nature's work on the grand scale can be seen here. Other places in the world, it may be worthwhile to mention or to describe the general character of the great jungles - here called scrubs - in which the timber-trees grow...all of it very tall and dense, the varieties and species are almost beyond counting. The very names almost unknown except to botanists. The general effect is very beautiful - in places great belts and groups of tall graceful feathery-topped palms one hundred feet high, many trees are decked out with big bunches of tree-ferns, staghorns, elkhorns, crown, birds nest, ribbon and others. Here and there small openings called "pockets" are met with and surrounded by such beauties of fern, palm, and other foliage as to suggest a veritable fairy-dell."

After losing his job at the Mungar sawmill with the arrival of Queensland Rail, Armitage had many diverse experiences as a contractor. One of Armitage's contracts was to build the telephone line from Bogimbah to Sandy Cape Lighthouse in 1885. His memoirs describe his contracting experiences. These resulted in a more intimate association with Fraser Island, particularly in his latter years operating timber barges:

I went into business as a Government works contractor, building and repairing railway works and bridges, wharves, buildings and telegraph lines all over the State. I put up more than a thousand miles of telegraph wire. One of my last jobs being the re-erection of the Antigua railway bridge carried away in the 1893 flood. Nothing since then except for two training walls on the Mary River to improve the navigable channels, that appears to have succeeded, as no dredge work has been done since and that was 23 years ago. I took shares in the establishment of the Maryborough Sugar Factory, but it was not a success. We lost £25,000 we put into it, and walked out without a shilling. We had not enough capital, not near enough to see us through. The present proprietors seem to be making it pay but many conditions have altered since then.

Having built up a floating plant in connection with the sugar factory (punts and tug steamers), they were all left on my hands when the factory scheme collapsed. I had to find work for them where I could. For the most part I once more fell back on the good old log-timber trade. The punts carried the logs, the steamers towed them, and also towed sailing ships when any could be got, but steam has steadily wiped out the old sailers. There are none now. Nothing remains now but the log trade, and not much in that. In order to increase the volume of trade, I induced the two big sawmill firms of Maryborough (Messrs Wilson Hart & Co and Hyne and Son) to put up the necessary capital to build a railway to tap the big timber scrubs on Fraser Island. This was done, and I built the railway and my plant was kept fairly busy for 18 years past. Two big blocks were cut out, or nearly so, and the line has been sold and taken away to a big sugar mill.

Some "Skipper" Anecdotes

Rollo Petrie was in awe of Skipper who he met while his father was chief forester and Rollo was growing up on Fraser Island between 1905 and 1920.

Rollo described Skipper who would often visit the Petrie family delivering them fresh supplies whenever we went from Maryborough to Fraser Island as *"a colourful figure with a fiery Irish temper and a lovable Irish way"*. Rollo said that some of his experiences and exploits must have been hard to believe. These are just three of the many anecdotes Rollo recorded:

The trouble with steamers: One day, Skipper was loading logs into the barge at Wangoolba Creek, Skipper called for the sling to come back to relocate a log being slightly out of place on the floor of the hold. As he leaned over the side of the hold, the sling tipped him from behind. Skipper speared down head-first, hitting his head on a log in the hold. He was carried up on deck and laid on his back. It was thought he was dead. After a while he was noticed to be breathing so the *"Geraldine"* (steam launch) was unloaded to make a rush trip to Maryborough. Skipper was in hospital several days before regaining consciousness. His first words complained of how sore his legs were. *"It's your head that is sore,"* he was told. However, on examination it was found that the calves of both legs were badly burned. He had been laid across a hot steam pipe on deck of the boat which had brought him to hospital several days earlier. It was not a very good recommendation hospital staff! After his recovery Skipper had a stiff neck His head was permanently turned to one side. He had to turn his body to look round one way.

Getting things straight: Skipper would frequently go up to the scrub on the train to check on work there. On a previous trip he had instructed Alf Jarvis, the native (loco driver) to remove an overhanging Banksia branch above the track as it was getting close to the chimney stack. About two years after the accident which twisted his neck the branch was still there. The quick tempered Skipper grabbed an axe, called Jarvis to steady down climbed up on the tender and made a swipe at the branch. However he lost his footing and he speared head-first over the side, hitting his head on the end of a railway sleeper. He had another trip to Maryborough Hospital, still unconscious, with some people worried that the old warrior might never recover. Some time later he was alright again, but the truth is stranger than fiction. His neck returned to normal and remained so.

A true hero: Another time In Maryborough, while Skipper was walking down the street, he heard yells - looked back to see a horse in sulky bolting, down the street, a woman and baby aboard. Skipper raced out into the street and started running in the direction the horse was travelling. As it passed him he threw himself on to its head and neck, pulling the horse to a standstill in the process. The sulky shaft had pierced his coat from the side and was poking out through his chest - or seemed to be. One woman fainted. However the shaft had only gone under his arm.

This FIDO Backgrounder (No. 55) is a supplement to MOONBI 125. It was first published in MOONBIs 42 and 43. FIDO is indebted to the Patterson family for access to his journals. His niece, Kathleen Armitage, was FIDO Treasurer during FIDO's early days in the early the 1970s.