

Balarrgan and the Timber Industry (Part 1)

While searching for land with potential for timber and grazing in 1842, Andrew Petrie landed on K’Gari at Balarrgan to pick up an Aboriginal guide to help his small boat and crew navigate the Moonaboola (Mary) River (which Petrie called the Wide Bay River). Petrie picked up more than a river guide. He picked up reports of the grand timber of this fabled island. On his return to Brisbane these reports spread far and wide around the infant Queensland colony. Ironically it was Petrie’s son Tom who facilitated the start of the timber industry. That industry was to dominate K’Gari for the next 128 years. This FIDO Backgrounder No 77 by John Sinclair (August 2016) describes the subsequent role Balarrgan played in that industry.

The early years of K’Gari’s timber industry was one of rape and plunder. The first timber removed from Fraser Island was taken by a scoundrel known as Yankee Jack Piggott in 1863. He died soon afterwards being speared by Aborigines. It is generally believed that this was retribution for his interference with Aboriginal women. Andrew Petrie’s grandson Walter described operations: *“The first attempt to log these fine trees was made by Yankee Jack and his party in 1863. His intention was to dam the creek which now bears his name and raft the logs down, but he was killed by the blacks on the beach where the leading lights now are and his party broke up in consequence.”*

Three parties of timber getters were at work in the Aboriginal Protection Areas of the island in 1869 *“with the full approval of the Lands Department”*. The original timber operations were limited to the southern part of the island immediately north and south of Ballargan. Kauri and white beech (*Gmelina liechhardtii*) were the first targets for exploitation. They would float. Wanggoolba Creek was dammed and then breached to allow a rush of water to carry them down to the estuary.

In 1913 Petrie described the early operations to float out the kauri. *“Many fine trees were logged with the expectation of (floating them down the freshwater streams) and rolled in the shallow but strongly running creek. A trial dam was constructed ... the attempt had to be abandoned ... Helped by the perpetual flow of shallow water and the firm sand bottom with twelve bullocks per team - using two teams to one log ... The blacks then took charge and steered them round the sharp bends and they were eventually “boomed” at a point in the salt water near the mouth of the creek. The logs were drifted up to Mary River... Abandoned logs ... imbedded in the sand under the shallow water of the creeks (were) preserved to water level. Exploitation has been heavy”*.

After the Aboriginal reserve was withdrawn in 1864, horses and bullock teams were taken to the island and the operations became more sophisticated. Other commercial species, particularly Tallowwood, were targeted under the term “selective logging”.

By 1887 the timber industry was looking far afield for markets. Parsons reports that *“...sleepers required for Darwin (presumably for the Transcontinental railway) were taken to North White Cliffs and loaded onto the British India ships”*. The discovery of Gympie gold in 1867 meant much international shipping heading north along Australia’s East Coast diverted into Great Sandy Strait where the ships picked up cargo such as railway sleepers for India and the sailors left behind venereal disease and opium addiction

Following the removal of the Aborigines from the Bogimbah Mission, the Aboriginal reservation for that part of the island was revoked and construction immediately began on a rail line

to access big stands of Tallowwood and Blackbutt in the Poyungan and Bogimbah Creek areas. The latter area is now known as the Valley of the Giants.

In 1915, the tramline was shifted to tap the Wanggoolba Creek hardwood stands near Central Station. However Balarrgan’s turn to host the axe and saw men was nearing rapidly.

With the conclusion of World War One, things really began to move again around North White Cliffs. The "Brisbane Courier" of 4th July, 1918 reported that Mr. Hepburn McKenzie, a large NSW timber merchant had contracted to purchase timber off 4050 hectares (10,000 acres) on Fraser Island. The contract provided for the cutting and sawing of 100,000 super feet of Island Turpentine and Scrub Box a month from April 1919 with a complete removal in 10 years. A sawmill was required to be built at the Quarantine Station. The press reported that removal of the timber *“will involve the construction of a tramway system on the island”*.

The McKenzie era is summarized in a separate page.

While Wilson Hart and Hyne & Sons logged only Tallowwood or Blackbutt, McKenzies took Turpentine (Satinay) and Brush Box. Wilson Hart extended their tramline even further from Wanggoolba Creek estuary to Central Station to the Tallowwood patch just north of Lake Boomanjin in 1917.

The viability of the McKenzie operation was dependent on being able to ship the timber directly from K’Gari to Sydney. At first the sawmill workers would help load the McKenzie ship. Wharfies in Maryborough demanded that this be done by unionists who had to be taken to and from the mainland to carry out that work. This made the whole McKenzie venture unprofitable and McKenzie had to abandon the enterprise.

Upon the recommendation of the provisional Forestry Board in 1926, the Government purchased the logging tramline, wharves, etc., previously owned by Messrs McKenzie Ltd., of Sydney, the tramway, which was to be operated Departmentally, being purchased for the sum of \$10,000 (5,000 Pounds).

Although the rail was closed, the McKenzie’s Jetty terminus was used until 1937 when motorized transport took over carrying timber from the island’s forests to the logging dumps spread along the west coast.

Logging of the forest continued for another 70 years after the closure of the McKenzie Sawmill but the rate of harvest was influenced by the market, which fell during the Great Depression of the 1930s and WWII. The post-war building boom saw a dramatic increase in demand for timber. The demand outstripped the available preferred hardwoods and logging of rainforest timber began. FIDO Backgrounder 79 will follow the questioning the sustainability of Fraser Island logging.

The McKenzie Era at Balarrgan

H. McKenzie (Queensland) Limited was registered to acquire the rights under the 28 March 1918 agreement. Once he had secured rights to K'Gari's timber resources, the well organized McKenzie quickly initiated action on the ground. Work was commenced immediately that the deal was sealed that still bears the McKenzie name. Work proceeded with urgency and efficiency under a team brought up from the Sydney HQ. By the middle of 1919 secondary hard-woods were being broken into slabs on the island and transferred to McKenzie's ship to be taken to Sydney for further processing at his large sawmill there.

The initial stumpage price McKenzies contracted to pay was 8 cents (9 pence) per 100 super feet. This was a significant increase from earlier royalties. In 1905 the royalty for Tallowwood was 5 pence per 100 super feet. This was increased to 8.5 pence per 100 super feet for Tallowwood and Blackbutt until the end of 1915 (Petrie). However, the Maryborough mills were not forced to take Turpentine and Scrub Box which they deemed inferior and the timber was close to the mills and markets.

Three sawmills were located two miles inland up Foulmouth Creek (the creek was named for the bad language used at the camp). The tramline route can still be easily traced with its smooth grades and steep cuttings. The tramline followed a regular steady climb from the sawmill all the way to the 7-20, which was exactly seven mile sand twenty chains from the jetty in an even steady climb. From the 720, the main line extended east towards Wabby Lakes and Bill Seelke's Camp where the log hauler was located.

Sid Jarvis, a former Fraser Island bullocky, commented on the McKenzie operation in 1975: *"There was a log hauler used by the McKenzies to haul timber out of the scrub. It was an American invention and I'm not sure how it was powered. To operate it they used to take out the little wire rope, then hook it on to a snatch block and it was pulled into the start to take a big rope and it was that big rope which hauled the logs in. A big cable was hooked on to the logs, and they used to use a chain or dogs on the log and wind it up. They operated the log hauler for McKenzies mill until the McKenzies went broke. Only the McKenzies used such an invention. Neither Wilson Hart nor Hynes did it. They used only bullocks, and some of the big grooves and trenches, such as the one going up towards Wabby Lakes are the relics of the grooves worn by the hauling logs in past days by the log hauler, because this was one of the areas it operated in."*

"... They would cut up anything. They just cut big flitches and they sent it from here to Sydney. Just the heart and the rubbish stopped behind on the island. The "firewood" they called it. It stayed behind, whilst the rest of the big stuff was sent off. They took everything. They took turpentine and box. They were fairly hungry for timber, I suppose. The Maryborough mills at the stage wouldn't take turpentine. There were two steam locomotives operating from McKenzies ... They used to have an ordinary locomotive and one that ran on a cog wheel. Both of them ran on tracks, which were about 3'6"

Charles McKenzie who worked on Fraser Island during the whole of the McKenzie era from 1919 to 1925 captured some enduring impressions of the island through his photography which was fortunately preserved by his family. In 1980 he recalled some of the Fraser Island operations which his father had initiated.

"McKenzies fell and removed logs of blackbutt tallowwood and turpentine piles which were used for wharf and jetty construction. The site of North White Cliffs, just opposite the Mary River Heads, was chose (sic) for the steam-engined saw mill he built. It was equipped with a log-breaking down frame saw, a 48-inch circular saw bench, docking cross cut saws and a small circular saw bench. Another saw mill also was built later."

The Rail Line: Rail lines played a major part in transporting timber from the forests to McKenzie's Jetty. Two tramlines had been previously constructed. In 1905 a line was built from the mouth of Urang creek, (north of Balarrgan) into the Bogimbah Scrub, while in 1918, another line was built from the mouth of Wanggoolba Creek through what is now Central Station to access a large patch of turpentine.

However the McKenzie line was famous because it operated for 18 years. There are many great yarns told of the days of colourful steam and the colourful characters who operated the locomotives. The Fraser Island rail was the source of many entertaining stories



McKenzie's Loco operated on Fraser Island from 1918 to 1937

One story concerned a loco driver, "Bendy" Weber. Bendy had collected a rake of timber from the camp of bullocky, Bill Seary west of Wabby Lakes. Bill Seary was out mustering his bullocks when Bendy collected his assigned. On his return Bill started yoking up his team in the cleared area of the rail line. In the meantime Bendy Weber was making heavy going along the wet track with the wheels spinning under the heavy load on the long up-hill grade to the 7-20, the highest point on the track. He had almost made it but the wheels wouldn't grip. Bendy knew how to solve the problem. He jumped out and started throwing sand under the steel wheels to get them to grip. His fireman was doing the same thing from the opposite side of the Loco. Alas they lost the battle. The loco and its load of logs went careering backwards down the track with Bendy and the fireman in pursuit. It reached Seary's camp before they could catch it and skittled the team that Bill Seary was yoking up.