

SAGAS OF THE EARLY DAYS :

"The Cedar-Seekers Were Rugged Men"

● "Before I proceed to an account of this second phase, let me re-survey the first decade of settlement on the river, examining features which so far have been by-passed in my narrative. The campaign was carried out in a setting of sylvan beauty, but the actual community life of which so much has been told and written, was far from being Elysian. Too often was it in marked contrast to Nature's lovely setting. During the first decade increasing numbers of cedar-getters came in. The care-free adventurous rovers, of whom some have been wont to write, constituted but a percentage from this influx. They were not always so colourful as some writers would have us believe, and the alluring wealth of red cedar did not produce commensurate monetary wealth and happiness for the cedar-getters themselves," writes WINDSOR LANG in the third of his Saga series. . . .

BY WINDSOR LANG.

TOO often have writers, covering the early period in this river's history, remarked: "The cedar getter has gone"—or—"The cedar getter moved on to new fields of adventure," as if he had packed up his tent and drifted out of our ken. Whilst that was true of the adventurous minority, fortunately for the district the majority stayed on after the cedar-getting days had passed, participating in and contributing to the progress of the region. The productivity of the district was developed, its cultural life was advanced and broadened, and the moral fibre of its people was strengthened because they did so.

It is admitted that amongst the cedar-getters existed some who belonged to a type apart. They lacked many social qualities that would have permitted them to fit into a normal community, yet they would appear to have been equipped by nature to meet and satisfy the demands of mental and physical endurance which the wild pioneering life made upon them. They were rough and reckless, albeit generous. They had developed a sense of justice that admitted no compromise. The comparative freedom of the scrub wilderness far outweighed any allure that the city might hold.

Mr. Archie Meston, who knew the old hands well, and who is an undis-

Old hands well, and who is an undisputed authority. said of the type:—
“Mostly wifeless and childless, they rambled as nomads through the country, especially after the diggings started and gradually died out. As a youth I met scores of them employed as shepherds, cedar-getters, fencers, shingle-getters, odd-job men, or general farm hands, and nine out of ten of them died as bachelors. As a rule they were silent, taciturn men, very uncommunicative unless one had their confidence.

“They had their own code. Usually they were strictly honest, very truthful, and very loyal to each other. They were amongst the most hospitable of

hosts. Arrival at their camp meant one's immediate introduction to a bit of damper and a pannikin of tea.”

On the whole, undeniable courage, tenacity, powers of endurance, and purposeful activity were the common traits of practically all types of cedar-getters. Some few fell below these standards, and were not morally strong enough to withstand the onslaught of conditions which they had to encounter. They are more deserving of our understanding pity than of our censure.

What of the cedar-getter's wife and family? Their home was a practically-bare hut without any garden to brighten it. The husband and father was away sometimes for months at a

was away sometimes for months at a stretch. No doctors, no schools, no clergy, no churches, no places of amusement were established on the river for over twenty years after the first settlement. The women-folk with thread and needles operated by hand—years passed before sewing machines were available—and from a limited stock of material provided the clothing for the family needs, and renovated the used.

Little scope was there for the development of creative, needlework art. Rare, painfully rare, were the occasions when a fashion journal was there, luring them to interestedly scan its pages. Nimble fingers became both

creative, and expert, in fashioning, from plaited strips of the scrub-growing palm leaves, the broad, and serviceable, cabbage-tree hats that were universally worn in the district. They also became well-versed in the use of the three-legged camp-oven, and excelled in producing home-made bread.

They proved that delectable cooking could be done by using hot coals and ashes. They adapted themselves to the art of preserving the coals by "banking" the fire. Scarcity of matches made them adept in the preservation of live coals in the tinder-box. They had little, however, with which to broaden their dream-horizons, and the tallow-dip night-lights but added to the sense of depression.

to the sense of depression.

We sense the applicability of these lines from George Essex Evans:—

“The red sun robs their beauty, and
in weariness and pain,

The slow years steal the nameless
grace that never comes again.

Theirs was a lot capable of daunt-
ing any but the bravest hearts, and
yet those very trials developed the
qualities of endurance, hardihood,
sympathetic understanding, and kind-
ness which helped to sustain their
men-folk, and to compensate in no
mean measure for the drawbacks.

Shortly after first settlement on the
Richmond—and in the year 1842—
New South Wales fell into the throes
of a general depression that covered
the whole of the first decade of set-
tlement here. Later on in my story I
shall show how this seriously affected
the squatters, but just here I wish
to give some idea of its effect on the
cedar-getters.

I have heard of how the cedar-
getter collected and squandered his
“seasonal cheques”—but let me quote
from one of the original pioneers,
Mr. James Ainsworth:—

“The general conditions of river
settlement were ‘bad in the extreme
about the middle 50s. They were of
such a character indeed as to be scar-
cely intelligible to men and women of
today. At the beginning were neither
horses nor cattle, no police, no doctors,
no schools, no clergy, no churches.

no schools, no clergy, no churches, no banks, no money, no roads, only scant and interrupted supplies of the bare necessities of life. The outbreak

of the gold "diggings" brought widespread prosperity to the colony, and better days to the river.

The price of cedar had been down to 10/- and 15/- per 100 feet in Sydney. It bounded up to £3/2/6 per 100 feet. At this fabulous sum it was nearly as valuable as gold itself. As a result men flocked to seek fortunes in the scrub, but the matter of transport became very serious. Sailors deserted to the "rushes". Ashore, men helped each other as mates—not as master and man. The one great drawback in this golden period was the marketing of the timber. This more than counterbalanced the enhanced price.

Mr. Northwood, incidentally the man who fitted-out Hargraves in his quest for gold was the principal timber-buyer. He controlled the cedar trade in the city. In fact he was practically the monopolist.

Billy Wright then entered the lists as an agent, but there was no resultant benefit from the competition. Mr. Wright got a footing with Mr. Charles Jarrett as his river representative, and rapidly built up a big connection. The cutters, after the logs were measured up, were paid with

were measured up, were paid with I.O.U.'s. on Billy Wright—The cutters derisively dubbed these paper notes "Shin Plasters"—but as this money could only be realised in Sydney, losses to owners will be readily understood."

Frequently the cutters utilised these notes as mediums of exchange with traders in other commodities. They could not be readily discounted through a trading bank.

The first bank was established at Grafton in 1859. Grafton, in any case was not easily accessible from the Richmond. A bank was not established on the Richmond until 1869. Many of the notes passed through the hands of the proprietors of bush shanties.

The rough plan of discount by this means was that the I.O.U. was held until goods up to approximate value were bought. I could leave it to your imagination to realise how unsatisfactory the plan could prove to be.

However, I shall continue to quote Mr. James Ainsworth.

(To be continued.)