

---

# Seventy-five Years on the Richmond.

1847—1922.

---

## James Ainsworth's Reminiscences

(No. 7.)

---

### FIRST CEDAR LICENSES.

Prior to the establishment of the civil courts and public offices at Casino, the nearest town at which Richmond River official or banking business could be transacted was Grafton. The first licenses to cut cedar in the North Creek and Emigrant Creek scrubs were taken out there and were issued by Commissioner Oliver Fry. That was in or about the year 1851. These licenses were limited to felling and sawing the cedar only, as squaring the timber was not then allowed. Each license cost £6. The cedar getters went over to Grafton in a body for these licenses, but when appraised of the restrictions and the fee charged they refused to accept them and returned to Ballina, where they renewed their timber activities in defiance of the law. It is of interest to recall that at the beginning of the cedar traffic all logs were

ning of the cedar traffic all logs were sawn into fitches in order to fit and stow them more compactly in the cramped holds of the necessarily very small vessels trading to the river in those days. Later when the outer and upper creeks and tributaries were opened and cleared of snags and barriers and the bar as a result correspondingly deepened, larger vessels followed and made easier the way of the squaring axe in the displacement of the saw. Jimmy Smith, of Sydney, was the first to traffic in these axes, and they rapidly gained such favor that in the next issue of licenses provision was made for squaring the logs as an alternative to fitching them with the pit saw.

#### **THE GENESIS OF LISMORE.**

It has already been stated that Lismore, 65 miles by river from Ballina, owes its origin to the late Henry Wilson, who acquired the whole of the open country at the head of the North Arm and round and about the junction of Wilson's and Leicester's Creeks as a cattle station. This very junction now, by the way, constitutes the heart of one of the wealthiest, most progressive, and best equipped municipalities in Australia. The Lismore homestead in the fifties was further down river at the foot of Girrard's Hill. Wilson's Creek wound its way lengthily through scrub and hills from Lismore until it

scrub and hills from Lismore until it finally disappeared at its source in the heights east of Bangalow and overlooking Byron Bay. Curiously enough, these same heights in the same locality also provide the fountain from which Emigrant Creek, taking a more southerly direction, wriggles its way through Newrybar, to Tintenbar, and on to Ballina at the extreme mouth of the river. Both creeks played a conspicuous part in the old cedar campaigns. Leicester's Creek, which junctions with Wilson's Creek at Lismore, was named after the late Mr. Leicester, who, possessing an elemental knowledge of medicine and surgery, was wont to apply his powers generously to the needs of the timber men and their wives and children and was long held by them in grateful esteem. After the first cedar had been removed from the banks of the Lower River creeks, the exploration and opening up of the arms above Lismore gave a new impetus to the industry. As a result, new settlers found their way north, and many of the original pioneers removed there and, erecting the first hasty humpies at the junction, laid the foundation of the Lismore town. In the decades that followed millions of feet of cedar, pine, sycamore, gumwood, teak, and other timbers found their way down these tributaries to the main river. In the dry

the main river. In the dry  
when the creeks were low the  
employed felling and haul-  
to these waterways, where  
branded and left to await  
ood to sweep them down to  
ere a heavy iron chain  
retched across the river to  
eeding logs and hold them  
a time as they could be  
sorted out by their own-  
ment. This method gave  
urse to a series of frauds  
a gad for a number of  
pened occasionally that  
nd at the chain bearing  
men whom it was known  
them, and gradually it  
that the dishonest  
y in the community.  
brand faking become  
free in the end that

concerted action was taken to suppress  
it and to bring those responsible for  
it to justice.

### **THE BIGGEST CEDAR TREE.**

The largest quantity of cedar got  
out of the Richmond River creeks at  
the one time was about one million

the one time was about one million feet in the early sixties. To Tommy Foley was given the credit of felling and working the biggest tree. This was found at the junction of Wilson's and Skennar's Creeks, near Booyong, when something like 33,000ft. of marketable timber was taken from the giant. In '64 the O'Neills worked a tree on Wilson's Creek above Montecollum, near Mullumbimby, which yielded about 10,000ft. This latter tree grew upon a tiny island in the creek, and was first seen by George Williams and Joe Eyles, who passed it by on the ground that it was a "bit too big." The O'Neills, who were not so particular, cut it into 8ft. lengths, and when the flood came to carry the timber out to the main stream it was noticed that they had turned over and floated on their ends owing to the fact that the diameter of the logs was greater than their length. Unlike Foley's tree, the O'Neill specimen was short and thick in the trunk, whereas the Booyong mammoth cut splendid logs, even from its limbs. The recollection of these immense trees suggests many stories told at the time of the prowess of the men with axe and saw, whose one occupation it was to find the cedar in the scrubs and then tow in it for the market. The most arresting achievement

in this connection perhaps stands to the credit of Tommy Chilcott, who, when engaged on Emigrant Creek, found himself, for a period, without a mate. He did not allow this circumstance to stand in his way, but undertook to work the pit by himself. He manoeuvred the logs unassisted—save by brute strength and leverages—on the skids over the pit, and then, fastening a bag of heavy iron wedges to the saw—in lieu of a mate—he ripped off the fitches from the top single-handed. It is not known that this wonderful feat was ever before attempted—much less performed—by any one man, and nowadays it will only be those who understand what pit-sawing really means, who will appreciate to the full Chilcott's amazing achievement. George Cooper (father of the late George Cooper, and Ben Cooper, of Tintenbar), when operating cedar near Bexhill on Cooper's Creek—called after him—also put up a record, only less astonishing than Chilcott's. In the absence of a mate he harnessed his two boys to the bottom of the saw—one on each side—and, working from the top himself, cut away until he secured more serviceable and efficient help.

### **BRUNSWICK CEDAR.**

In the early fifties—about '52 to be

In the early nineties—about 1892 to be exact—after the handy cedar had been cut along the banks of the main creeks and tributaries of the Richmond, attention was directed to the scrubs of the Brunswick where the coveted red wood was known to be plentiful. By “handy” cedar is meant, of course, the cedar that grew beside the edges of navigable water and required only to be felled and cut into logs, and rolled into the streams, when it was at once ready for rafting and subsequent shipment without further trouble or expense. At that time there were no bullocks in the district and consequently the haulage of logs from a distance was out of the question. Included in the first party to exploit the Brunswick were Johnny Boyd, Tom Boyd, the Kings, Tom Ainsworth, and Joe White. These pioneers in the course of a brief campaign felled and shipped all the removable timber and then returned to the Richmond to follow the cedar with bullock teams back from the main waterways. They were attended on the Brunswick by some ten or fifteen small schooners, which transported the logs, or rather fitches, to Sydney. The river entrance was one in name only, and was infinitely more difficult to negotiate than the Richmond, which in those days was bad enough. Due to this disability the ves-

enough. Due to this disability the vessels sent there were so small that 5000 ft. constituted a cargo for many of them, while 20,000 feet was a maximum. In 1864 the industry on the Brunswick was revived, and with the introduction of bullock teams the arms and creeks of the river were worked to the uttermost extent. Shipping again became active, and the tiny river hummed with life and industry. Captains Ben Alley and Harry Jackson commanded Brunswick traders at this period, and among those engaged ashore were Jos Eyles, Jack Johnston, J. Ainsworth, C. Williams, B. McCurdy, G. Williams and Jim Ross.

#### **RECORD FLOODS.**

The greatest Richmond River flood within the white man's memory occurred in 1858 or 1860. With the press of cedar, it broke the big chain at Lismore, and several hundred thousand feet of log timber went over the bar to sea. Much of it was afterwards recovered from the coastal beaches. This flood also cut a new wide, straight, and deep channel (a 22ft. pole found no bottom in it) through the South Beach in the vicinity of the present day refreshment rooms. The sea, breaking through this opening, whipped up by the accompanying gale, flooded and smashed down a number of tenements at West Ballina which were also

ments at West Ballina, which were also carried out by the rushing torrent. It was possible during this visitation to row a boat from Woodburn to Coraki in a direct line across country and in the same way over to Evans River. The next extra-heavy flood was in 1864, when in fact there were no less than eight inundations rapidly following each other in the one year. Henry Cook had erected the framework of a house at Dungarubba when the first of the '64 floods came down. The cattle on the plains rushed the temporary floor of this structure for shelter, and the whole being bodily swept away by the current the carcasses of the dead beasts were afterwards found packed in the wrecked building like sardines in a tin. This flood resulted in heavy loss of cattle, as well as timber. Clark Irving and William Yabsley were exceptionally hard hit, and Henry Wilson, of Lismore, scarcely ever recovered the blow. While no record of the height of the '58 flood was kept, so far as is known, the flood in '04 rose 30ft. in Lismore.

---

## BYRON BAY IN FLOOD AND STORM

## **STORM.**

In '64 I was engaged in hauling cedar into Skennar's Creek, and at the time of the flood, was busy salvaging the wrecked tallow washed up from the foundered schooner volunteer on Tallow Beach and in Byron Bay. A terrific easterly gale and blinding rain set in which in many places battered down the protecting terraces behind the beaches and thus allowed the ocean to flood the low lands beyond. In this way the sea penetrated to where the creamery now stands and filled the swamp opposite all the way to Bilongil Creek with salt water. The foam churned up by the agitated surf and lashed by the gale covered the old track between Tallow Beach and the Bay to a depth of ten feet in spots, and generally was higher than the horse's back. No vessel could have survived in the roadstead, and be it sadly stated many river ships off the coast at the time were never heard of again.

## **THE OLD HANDS.**

It is not the purpose of these Reminiscences to pursue the early timber men in anything like detail through all the varied phases and ramifications of the pioneering days, or even to follow them closely down the long years of their servitude and exile in the river

of their servitude and exile in the river scrubs. That task must be left to another time less hurried than the present. It is deemed sufficient at the moment merely to set out in these haphazard sketches the main features, incidents, and events dating from the birth of the settlement, and to leave it for the more leisured enthusiast of the future to elaborate the fuller narrative, and to marshal in proper and more extended order all other elements necessary for an accurate and complete story. It is doubtful, however, if this can now be done with the satisfaction that one could wish, as the generation to which the first arrivals belonged has passed away, and the Big Scrub which they loved to explore and to exploit has vanished with them. As was previously remarked of the "skippers" of the period, the "old hands" were also a class apart who appeared to have been especially equipped by nature and environment, both physically, mentally, and morally, for the difficult pioneering work given them to do. They were rough, generous, reckless, and kindly, with a sense of justice that admitted of no compromise, and a desire for liberty and freedom that—although often at variance with the restrictions of the time—was yet an inherent characteristic of the race. Many of them, it is true, had a connection with what

it is true, had a connection with what was known then as "The System," but everything considered they were as a whole never at any time the worse for the influences—sinister or otherwise—that led them to blaze the great white trail to the fastnesses of these remote districts. Archie Meston, who knew the "old hands" well, and who is an undisputed colonial authority, says of them: "The reader will be careful to remember that in Australia to-day there is but a very slight strain of the bad types, who, as a rule, did not marry and settle down. They either remained in Sydney and Melbourne, mostly wifeless and childless, or 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-splitters, odd-job men, or general farm hands, and nine out of ten lived and died as bachelors. As a rule they were silent, taciturn men, very uncommunicative, unless you had their confidence, and then they would tell you anything. Usually they were strictly honest, very truthful, very loyal to each other, and arrival at their camp meant an immediate request to "have a bit o' damper and a pannikin o' tea." . . . They settled at Illawarra, Shoalhaven, and the Hawkes-

warra, Shoalhaven, and the Hawkesbury, the Hunter, the Northern Rivers (including the Clarence, Richmond, and Tweed), the pioneers in all cases being the cedar cutters. They were amongst the first farmers and settlers on all those rivers."

### **THE ROMANCE OF RED CEDAR.**

The conquest of the Big Scrub by the first settlers suggests that something more might be recorded of the industry with which they were for so long identified. "The Machine Woodworker," an English magazine of August last, contains a well authenticated article entitled "The Romance of Red Cedar," which embodies a very accurate description and account of this most beautiful of Australian softwoods. In this publication it is pointed out that "this most valuable of all Commonwealth timbers is rapidly approaching extinction. It is the highest-priced wood to-day, and the price is increasing in the ratio of the scarcity. It is a timber restricted to a very small area and not found on more than 50,000 miles of the east coast, from Illawarra to Bloomfield River, near Cooktown (Qld.). It grows nowhere west of the Dividing Range, and is unknown south of Illawarra or north of Cooktown or in any part of the other States." The journal goes on to say: "Red cedar

Journal goes on to say . . . was first found in the scrubs of Illawarra, and there it was first cut by convict labor. . . . Following Illawarra, it was cut in the scrubs of the Hawkesbury and Hunter, and then ticket-of-leave men went gradually north to all the rivers as far as the Bellinger. When Capt. Ross, of the H.M.S. Rainbow, discovered and named the Richmond and Clarence, on his way from Moreton Bay to Sydney in 1828 his health was toasted at the Parramatta races in honor of the event. In 1836 two men, named Cole and Phillips, built a small schooner from red cedar at what is now South Grafton. Some of the runaway convicts from Port Macquarie found a sanctuary among the pioneer cedar-cutters on the Clarence and Richmond. Some were killed by the blacks, and a small number managed to reach Moreton Bay or Ipswich, . . . Next to the Clarence and Richmond came cedar-cutting on the Tweed about 1844. . . . The biggest patches of cedar in Australia, the biggest trees, and the best and most beautiful timber, came from the Big Scrub on the Richmond River and the Atherton tableland behind Cairns, and this is written ~~with~~ full personal knowledge of both localities and the trees thereof."

