

ORBOST & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY Inc.

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Laurie Light, Orbost sleeper cutter, 1950s-1992

Laurie's story as told to Heather Terrell, May 2016

LAWRENCE JAMES LIGHT (Laurie 'Popeye' Light)

I was born on 12th May 1938. My parents were Arthur Vernon Light and Nellie "Nell" Hall. Our family was six brothers and seven sisters.

When I first started working, I was around 16 years old. I worked as a billetter with my father so that I could get my licence to cut sleepers. We were working on Wehners Track. My father was sleeper cutting for the railways.

We would fall the trees, cut them into sleepers using the cross-cut saw and also the broad axe, and then we would pick them up by hand and load them on to Dad's truck and get them to the railway yard in Orbost.

There was a cattle yard at the station in those days. Sometime, we would have to wait while they loaded the cattle [c. 1950s].

You had to have a licence to go in to the bush to cut the sleepers.



ABOVE: Laurie Light, 2016. Photo by Heather Terrell

About four of us were working, the eldest brother, Dad, me and others. I started with a cross-cut saw falling trees and then later with a McCulloch chain saw. This [using the chain saw] happened later, after Dad's time.

I was looking for trees that I could cut 10 sleepers out of. Each sleeper had to be 9 ft long, 10 ins. wide and 5 ins. deep. We cut from White and Yellow Stringybark, Box, and Ironbark.

Dad also used to split palings for fences as well. He used a paling knife. He would pick a tree that was good for splitting palings and the palings would peel off, using the hammer to hit the paling knife. [See page 4].

After working with my father, one of my brothers and I worked together for about 15 years. We started on the broad axe and later, we used a swing saw. The broad axe was used to square the sleepers.

The sleepers which were cut with a broad axe seemed to last longer. The broad-axe closed pores in the timber and the swing saw opened up the pores in the timber. The sleepers finished with the broad axe were the best ones.

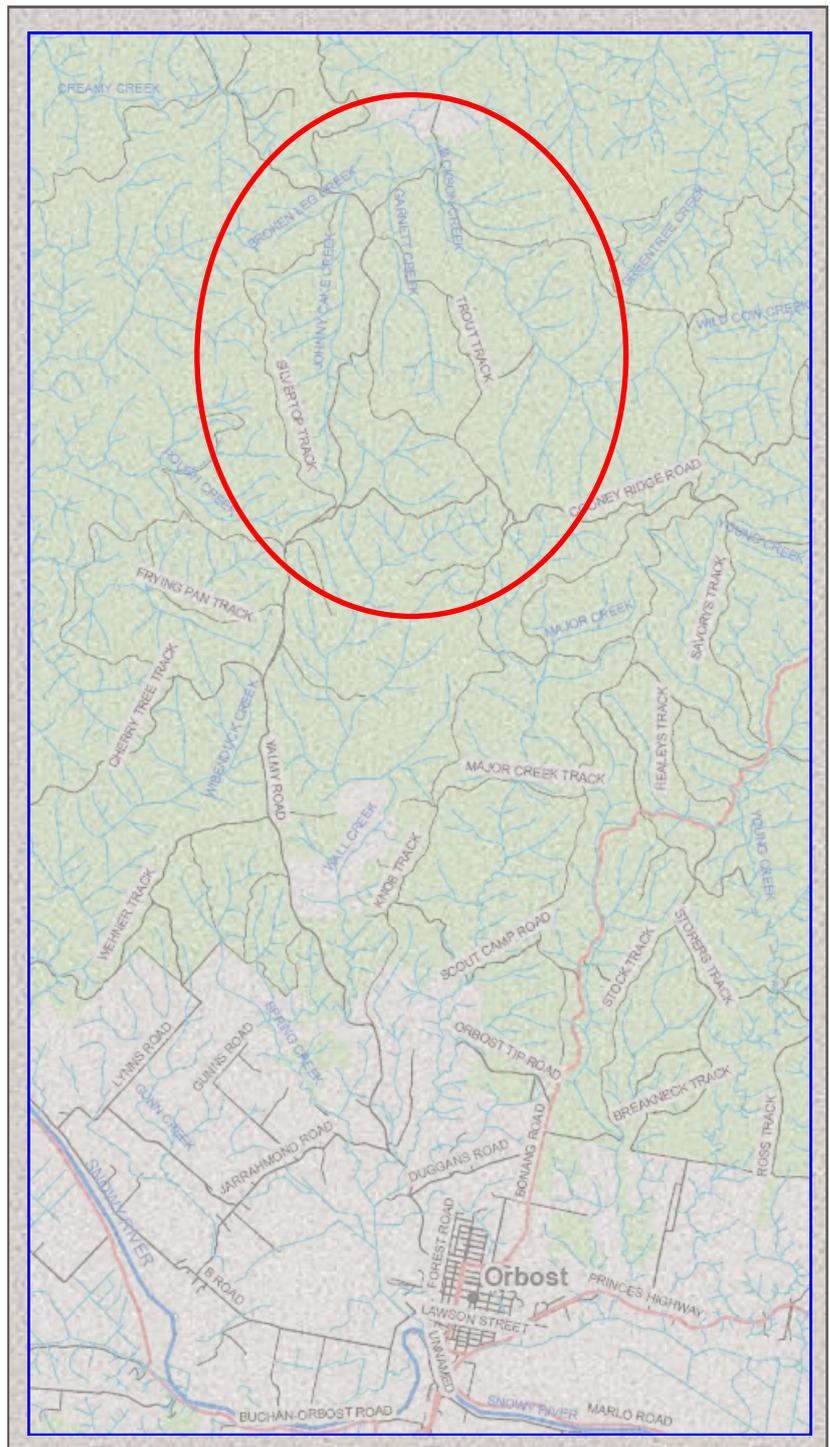
In the early years we had quotas for 200 sleepers [per week] and we were paid fortnightly. As time went on, our quota dropped to 70 and then we were paid monthly. Two of us could cut 500 a month.

We worked at Cooney's Ridge, over Johnny Cake Creek to get to Puppy Dog Creek. [Refer to red circled area on map. This map shows Cooney Ridge Road, and Johnny Cake Creek].

We loaded our sleepers onto a truck, 40 to a truck load. When we brought our sleepers in to the yard at the Orbost Railway, inspectors looked at them before loading and if they were not up to scratch, they would throw them out and the Forest Commission would take them. The Forest Commission owned the timber and you had to pay royalties if you wanted to keep them.

At one stage, there were 108 sleeper cutters working in the Orbost district, and then it finally went down to seven. Once it was down to a low quota for sleepers, it didn't pay to keep working and a lot of men dropped out.

We didn't wear earmuffs, but later on, all safety gear had to be worn. We used to start around 6am and go home around 6pm. That was in the early days when we were cutting 200 a week. We worked hard. On weekends, we would gullet the saws for the working week. Gullet means to touch them up with the stone.



My brother left for a while and later came back to work on the sleepers with me, and others working on the swing saw. I worked in the Puppy Dog Creek area up the Yalmy Road. Me and my brother also worked with Mack Donchi and family. I can remember Bob Donchi falling big trees. They were strong men. Mack could cut 100 to 120 sleepers in a day with the swing saw. He was as good as three blokes.

Mack also got a contract with the Railways to cut railway beams 21 ft. long, by 29 ins. by 9 ins. about a ton weight in each of them.

I'll tell you a story about my brother.

One day, when the tree is on the ground and cut into lengths, then you would mark them out with wedges and put the splitting gun in them to split them. The splitting gun has gunpowder in it. You would light the fuse and run real fast and get behind a tree or as far away as possible.

My brother got a broken nose from a piece of wood which flew from the centre of the log after the gun had gone off. He had poked his head out from behind the tree to have a look at what was happening and got hit. [See page 4 for more information on the use of a splitting gun].

Another time, when the tractor had a flat tyre, we jacked it up with a Wallaby Tail jack and then when the tyre was fixed, we let the jack down but it went down over two teeth instead of one and whacked me under the jaw. I must of have a tough jaw because it didn't break.

Later on, I ended up working with my nephew cutting sleepers. Things got tougher to make a living. They [Victorian Railways] would have preferred sleepers made from ironbark, anything that was durable instead of the white sleepers. They no longer wanted the white woods. Yellow Stringy was a good timber because it lasted longer.

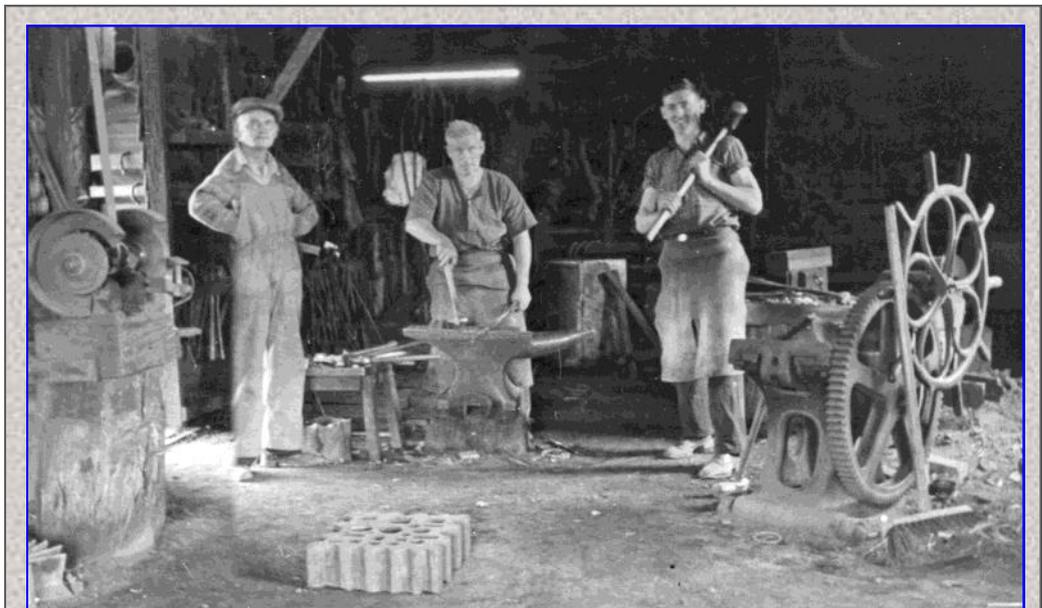
After the Railways stopped here [1987], we had to take our sleepers to Bairnsdale, and then in 1992 sleeper cutting ended here.



ABOVE: This is Laurie's cant hook. Sleeper cutters had several tools of trade, the cant hook being one of them. This hook was used to move logs and heavy timber using a bar through the ring for levering.

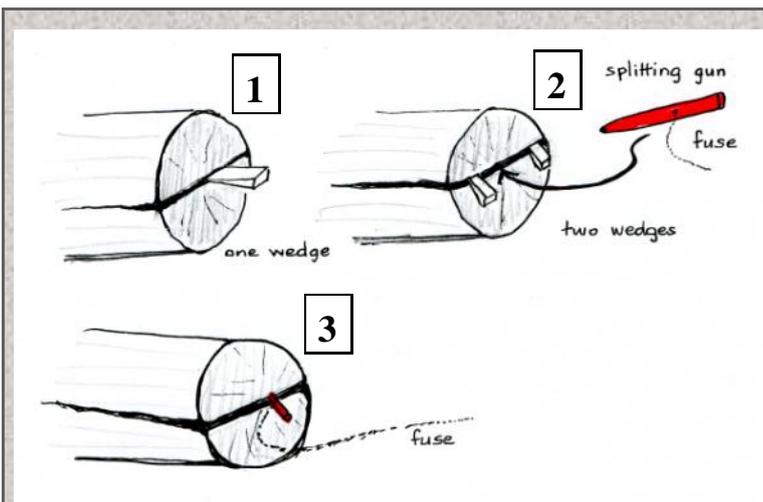
Laurie says that this cant hook was made at Ossie Wehner's blacksmith shop in Orbost.

Other necessary tools were billet hooks, axes (including the broad axe in earlier times), wedges and mallets. Laurie also refers to using a cross-cut saw in his early career, and then later, a McCulloch chain saw.



ABOVE: This 1940s photo is of the interior of Ossie Wehner's blacksmith and coachworks shop in Orbost. From left, Charlie Gough, Ossie Wehner, and Frank Morgan. The Wehner blacksmith shop is now (2016) used by Snowy River Cycling.

Just before we finished, the head bloke came from Melbourne to inspect the sleepers and he thought I had cut the sleepers with a saw bench but I had cut them with a swing saw, the job looked so good.



HOW TO USE A SPLITTING GUN

- 1 After the tree is felled, debarked, and cut to sleeper-lengths, a wedge is driven in to the end to open a split in the log.
- 2 A second wedge is driven in to further open the split. The splitting gun is prepared by being filled from the bottom end with gunpowder (black powder) and plugged with a small wad of paper.
- 3 The splitter is then driven in to the centre of the crack to a depth of about 10cm and the wedges removed. The splitter has a fuse inserted into the powder and out through a hole in the side wall. As well, the splitter is 'anchored' so that it does not fly out and get lost or cause damage.
- 4 The fuse is lit, and in Laurie's description, "*You run real fast and get behind a tree*" and wait for the bang.



LEFT: Laurie's splitting gun.

This 46 cm long 'gun' is a tapered metal cylinder which is hollow for about half of its length. Gunpowder is loaded in

from the bottom (pointed) end. The 'gun' is about 4cm in diameter. Drevemann's Hardware Store sold gunpowder.

The art was to use the right amount of gunpowder, too much and the log would be shattered. Also, there is no projectile in the 'gun', so the log is split by the shock wave created by the expanding gases.

Internet research indicates that the 'gun' could be an American invention from the 1920s.

RIGHT: Laurie worked with his father in cutting palings for fences. This paling knife is in the Orbost Museum's collection.

The bottom of the blade has a sharpened edge and is hit with a wooden hammer on the top edge.

A very similar tool is a froe which was used for splitting timber into shingles.



RIGHT: Laurie refers to using a broad axe. The photo at right is of a broad axe in Orbost Museum. These

axes are quite heavy and have relatively short handles. The blade is sharpened on one side only to produce a cutting edge appropriate for a right-handed person or a left-handed person.

There is quite a lot of skill involved in squaring and finishing the sleepers so that all edges are precisely and cleanly finished.

