

Memories of New Zealand students at the Australian Forestry School

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Background

Why did New Zealand send students to Canberra to study forestry between 1949 and 1968? Our Forestry School had closed in 1934. When the Technical Trainee scheme was launched in 1940/41, the Director of the Forest Service said that when trainees completed their science degree in New Zealand they would be sent overseas to study forestry if their own school had not re-opened by then. It did not re-open until 1969/70. Canberra had many attractions, one being its lower all-up costs than going to Europe. However, as time went on, some students weren't happy being sent to Canberra as they saw going to Europe as an opportunity for more extensive travel. Some students were sponsored by the private sector.

We were on a very tight budget which caused some of the students' families to live in very poor accommodations e.g. the Waldorf, the old mess, the Spruce Cubes, the Brickworks Hostel and the Black Mountain Motor Camp. Some had mothers-in-law with them to add to the hardships. The single students fared better with the opening of Forestry House about 1952. But we were made extremely welcome, and were given great help and hospitality by the New Zealand High Commissioner and his office. Generally our students were older, already having a degree and a lot of practical forestry experience which was welcomed by the staff. Many were ex-servicemen too, adding to their maturity. In spite of all these things their success rate in the course over the years is exemplified in the number of Schlich Medals won. Many of the School's traditions were established by New Zealanders or broadened by them, according to Doc Jacobs in 1960.

What happened to our students

I cannot deal with them all but I mentioned some under the following headlines, as follows:

Top posts with the New Zealand Forest Service

Andy Kirkland and Alan Familton both became Directors General and went on to other senior posts as the Service was disbanded. The following became Regional Conservators: Brown, Elliott, Molloy, Prior and Rockell.

Top forest managers in the private sector: Grayburn, Mitchell and Swale.

Top Forest Consultants: Groome, Olsen, Chandler and Wallis. John Groome led the way with consultants' recognition in New Zealand in place of registration by the New Zealand Institute of Forestry.

Top researchers: Bassett, Bunn, O'Loughlin and Sweet. Colin Bassett headed Forest Research for many years and Geoff Sweet went on to head the Forestry School in Canterbury. Bunn became well known for his eucalypt work in New Zealand.

Very diverse roles: Bruce McConchie worked in most forest disciplines and is now an Executive Director with World Vision. Jim Spiers managed Kaingaroa, became a logging specialist and headed Logging Research in New Zealand. Ian Hutchinson went on to specialise in the tropical rain forests of Central America. Trevor Foley and Norm Clinton influenced the New Zealand timber trade with Australia as T.T.C.s in Sydney. John Wardle has made a name for himself as a farm forester specialising in growing native beeches. Only John Rawson tried politics, but without much success. Some students returned to Australia to live and work.

Memories

Australian Forestry School (AFS) was a great experience for us all in different ways. Rugby, field trips, hardships for the families, friendships, drinking sprees, Charlie Carter and others. All these points have been raised with me by New Zealanders. None of us enjoyed our encounters with snakes, leeches and ticks.

All New Zealanders were expected to be All Blacks. That encouraged AFS to enter its own team in the rugby competition of 1949 and John Groome led that wonderful victory against Duntroon that year. Others mentioned later were Jim Spiers, Gavin Molloy, Ash Cunningham, Norm Clifton, Dave Prest, Keith Chandler and many more.

Golf, tramping, trips to the mountains and motorbikes were all important too.

New Zealanders were not used to cold strong beer, cheap wines and sherries, and some potent home brews. These led to some wild parties and escapades.

The first three Kiwis made an everlasting name for themselves pretending to be expert tree fellers. They felled a large globulus one Saturday morning for friends and cut off the electric power to Forrest just on lunchtime. What a mess we made and had to clean up on Sunday.

Some items to jog memories are Eric Ensor's gardening at the Waldorf, Peter Olsen's ribald singing, John Wardle's lack of athleticism, Dave Elliott's part in planting radiata pine on an island as Lake Burley Griffin was filled, serious religious discussions by Dave Blight, John O'Connor and Bruce McConchie, the effects of fires around Canberra in 1939 and 1952, and the red dust on the open truck field trips in Queensland, to mention some.

We will never forget the staff from Doc Jacobs to Andy Woods and Paula Reid, all making a major contribution to the success of the school. Les Carron continues with his work on forest history in his usual professional way. It was surprising that Charlie Carter came back in many memories because of his eccentricities, his philosophising and his dog Bran. Each of us had two great years at the Australian Forestry School.