**Boorara Tree**

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The mention of Boorara Tree in a recent edition of *The Pigeon* reminded me of stories about the tree and its fire watchers.

During the construction of the lookout in 1952, work had proceeded to the point where the wooden pegs had been inserted in a spiral up to the top of the tree and the prefabricated cabin was being bolted and nailed together. The Forests Department DFO at the time was John Meachem and he decided to climb the tree to inspect the progress of work on the installation of the cabin. Nearing the top, the peg onto which he had just stepped snapped off, leaving John hanging by his hands about 150 feet from the ground. He was able to swing himself back onto the peg below and descend safely. Another peg was taken up and drilled into place to enable the men working on the cabin to come down.

John was a cool customer (he had been a fighter pilot during the War and been awarded the DFC). He quickly introduced a new safety measure for tree tower construction, insisting that before any peg was installed in a ladderway it had to be thoroughly tested by inserting it into a slightly oversize hole in a nearby tree and having a large man jump up and down on it.

The wooden pegs for the lookout trees, incidentally, were all made of sawn two-inch by two-inch karri with a bevelled end for insertion in the augur hole in the tree. The peg that broke off under John's weight was investigated and the timber was found to be "heart", that is it was cut from the very heart of a log where the wood is often carroty.

I worked as lookoutman on the Gardner Tree southwest of Pemberton in the summer of 1960/61. All the lookouts were connected by bush telephone and to help allay the boredom of the job the lookouts would spend hours talking to each-other. The lookoutman on Boorara Tree at the time was the well-known Northcliffe settler Jim Laws, an experienced firewatcher and an amusing and garrulous Irishman. I once asked Jim had he ever thought what he would do if the tree suddenly fell over while he was up it. "Yes" he said. "I would ride 'er down until she was six inches from the ground and then just step off".

In 1969 when the great Boorara Fire swept through this area, Boorara Tree caught fire in several places, thanks to embers from the main fire front. Jim stayed up the tree providing essential observations while a member of the Northcliffe forestry gang climbed up with a packspray and doused the spotfires on the tree. Great courage was shown all round that day. I visited the tree during that fire and climbed it for a discussion with Jim and a view of the surrounding fire situation. I couldn't see much because of drift smoke, but Jim was a chirpy as ever, quite undeterred by his adventures of the previous day.

The axeman who pegged and topped Boorara Tree was George Reynolds, a forest workman from Ludlow who also pegged and topped the Gloucester and Beard Trees. The late Doc Ryan once told me that he had been in Northcliffe the day Reynolds axed the topmost branches off the Boorara Tree and he had travelled out there and made an 8-mm film of it. I have never seen the Doc's film and I hope it has been safely archived. Otherwise this amazing work was never captured on film, at least not to my knowledge.

Several of the lookouts who worked on Boorara Tree were women, including the Rudd sisters and Beryl Rowney, all of whom married forestry men. There is a good story about a courtship involving the tree; the names are suppressed to protect the innocent! Assistant Forester Jim Loverock once drove up to the tree and noticed a ladies bicycle leaning against its trunk, and there were sounds of distant laughter from above, and the tree seemed to be jerking about a bit and swaying more than usual. Jim entered the hut below and rang the tower cabin on the bush phone. After a moment, the towerman answered breathlessly, and Jim said sternly "This is to remind you that your job is to look for fire, not play with it!"

I never believed this story, as for one thing Jim was not that witty, but it is a story I like to retell from time to time to remind us that forestry work is not all smoke and hard yakka.