

‘A lonely, narrow valley’

Teaching at an Otways Outpost

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Abstract

The Victorian Government introduced free, secular, compulsory education in 1872. With the rapid expansion of mining, farming and forest industries in the following years, settlement spread to increasingly distant and remote areas of the colony, and hundreds of small bush schools were established to educate the growing numbers of young children in these ‘pioneer’ districts. Otway Saw Mills was typical of such places. Established in 1909 at Henry’s No. 1 Mill in the Otway Ranges, the school was home to fifteen successive teachers during its nineteen years of operation. Correspondence between the teachers and bureaucrats in Melbourne, preserved by Public Record Office Victoria, reveals many of the challenges and hardships faced by ‘bush schoolies’ in their remote and often lonely teaching lives.

In 1911, Clifford Stanford wrote to the Secretary for Education in Melbourne, complaining that his current teaching post was ‘an out-of-the-way place, and ... far from being a pleasant place to live’.[1] Stanford was head teacher at Otway Saw Mills School 3601, at Henry’s No. 1 Mill in the Otways Forest of south-west Victoria. His comments were typical of almost all the teachers who taught at the school during its existence. They complained about the cold, the isolation, the cramped accommodation, their health problems, and how much they wanted to be transferred elsewhere, as soon as possible. Their views, and the response of department bureaucrats, are preserved in the rich records of the Education Department now held by PROV. The correspondence offers a unique insight into the experiences of teachers posted to isolated settlements in Victoria in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this paper I use this material to explore how young teachers responded to living and working in a remote, mountain forest environment, and the rewards and challenges that went with the role.

The completion of railway lines to Forrest in 1890, and to Beech Forest by 1902, stimulated a major timber industry in the Otway Ranges.[2] Dozens of bush sawmills were scattered through the forest, linked by timber tramways to roads or rail lines. The steep terrain, wet weather and thick forest meant that many mills formed small, isolated settlements. Henry’s No. 1 Mill was typical of such places, established in 1904, deep in the watershed of the West Barwon River.[3] It was connected by a timber tramline to the railhead at Forrest, ten kilometres to the north, but the mill’s isolation meant that a permanent population of around 100 people lived on site. The mill settlement featured rough timber huts for single men and modest wooden houses for married men and their families, along with a boarding house, stables, post office, school and store. In 1927 the mill shed was destroyed by fire, resulting in the gradual abandonment of the site.



Photograph of Henry’s Mill, c. 1900. Courtesy of Birregurra District Historical Centre.

Agitation for the establishment of a primary school for the children at Henry's Mill commenced within months of the mill's opening in 1904. A range of arguments were made in support of the proposal, including the rent-free provision of a school building and toilets, accommodation for a male teacher, and the availability of pure water at the site. The likely initial attendance was cited as around twelve pupils, but likely to increase to twenty, a margin well above the Education Department's typical minimum of nine children for establishing a school. It was also argued that the timber available to the mill was likely to last at least eight years, and that more married people with children would move to the mill settlement if a school was provided, thereby increasing pupil numbers even further. It was pointed out that the nearest existing school was at Barramunga, five miles away over 'very precipitous country' without roads, and that the parents were willing to accept even an unclassified teacher.[4] In June 1905 the matter was still unresolved, with the mill children 'running wild' and receiving no formal education at all.[5] A few months later, however, the mill community agreed to let the matter stand over, as alternative arrangements appear to have been made, with parents sending older children to Melbourne and elsewhere for their schooling.[6]

Similar arguments were made several years later in 1908 when a formal petition to establish a state school at the mill was prepared.[7] It included the names and birth dates of children likely to attend and details of the proposed school building. The isolated nature of the settlement was again stressed, along with the likely longevity of the sawmill, the number of intending pupils, and the willingness of the mill proprietors to erect a building. Although negotiations took several months to complete, the Education Department eventually agreed to the proposal. It leased the building from the mill owners for a nominal yearly rent of £1, and appointed Leo O'Kelly as head teacher to open Otway Saw Mills School No. 3601 in January 1909.[8]

The school was 26 feet long and 13 feet wide, with a gabled iron roof, four small windows, internal pine lining, a dressed hardwood floor, and a weatherboard exterior. A wooden fireplace, pine door and a small ceiling vent completed the structure. It was equipped with two outhouses and a small fenced playground which abutted the tramline. A 600-gallon water tank was added in 1910, and in the following year a sand tray and observation case for Nature study were obtained. Inside, Department-issue desks and a portable blackboard were in place, along with a master's desk and stool, two book presses, an easel and a notation frame. Increasing enrolments by 1911 had some children sitting on boxes until two more desks arrived.[9]



Henry's Mill site, Great Otway National Park, 1999.
Photograph Peter Davies.

Deterioration in the school building was apparent within a few years. It is unclear whether this was due to poor design and construction, inappropriate materials, weathering, neglect, daily wear and tear or a combination of these. By 1913, 100 bricks were needed to mend the rear of the wooden fireplace, and a few years later the playground fence was in disrepair. In 1916, only eight years after its construction, there were requests from the parents, District Inspector and a local Member of Parliament to replace the 'antiquated little school room'. [10] The lighting, ventilation and floor space were by then regarded as inadequate and unhygienic by the school committee. The Education Department provided no maintenance allowance because it leased, rather than owned, the building. By 1923, however, it had agreed to increase the annual rental to £10 to permit the necessary improvements.[11]

A small wooden hut had been built in the school yard by the mill proprietors, WR Henry and Son. It served as a residence for Leo O'Kelly and his successor, Clifford Stanford. Subsequent teachers boarded with a family nearby, and converted the hut into a woodshed.[12] Such basic accommodation for teachers was typical at bush sawmills. Blanche Murphy's hut at the Rubicon school, for example, was only nine feet square, built of unlined weatherboards, and freely admitted 'rain water and mountain air'. [13] The teacher's hut at the Mississippi Mill was 'nothing much better than a Noah's Ark upon the waters. It is built nearly in the bed of the creek, and water flows right past it and nearly around it'. [14] The very basic teacher accommodation provided at sawmill settlements, however, was probably typical of that available to most teachers appointed to remote rural schools in Victoria during this period. Frank Tate, head of the Education Department at the time, referred to teachers' quarters as being well named, mere 'vulgar fractions' of homes.[15]

Teachers at Otway Saw Mills School also had to cope with increasing numbers of pupils. Enrolments had risen to 16 by 1908, to 25 by 1916, and by 1923 there were 38 pupils crammed into the small schoolroom.[16] Teachers' correspondence indicates not that family sizes were increasing, but that more workers with families were based at the mill, attracted by the provision of a school for their children. Children thus eventually formed about one-third of the mill's population. In addition, several mothers sent their under-age three- and four-year-olds to school as well, prompting teachers to protest that parents were avoiding their responsibilities and that the schoolroom was turning into a nursery as a result.[17]

Teachers

Otway Saw Mills was a single-teacher school. Fifteen successive head teachers taught there during its nineteen years of operation. All were male. Many were young, generally with limited teaching experience. Some were still in the process of gaining formal qualifications, which generally involved a two-year course at the Melbourne Teachers' College. Nevertheless, they all had at least some training in such subjects as English, arithmetic and algebra, domestic science, history, geography and physics. A few of the mill workers, on the other hand, were illiterate.[18] There was thus often a gulf in the education level between teachers and other members of the mill community. Some of the teachers clearly resented their low level of pay, and most felt that their education entitled them to better living and working conditions than those prevailing at Henry's Mill.

Teachers were comparatively poorly paid in this period, especially if they were only qualified to work in small rural schools. In 1912, for example, a 'Class VI' teacher, controlling a school of up to 35 pupils, earned about 46 shillings a week, or £120 per annum, the same as the basic wage. After nine years of service, this could increase to a maximum of £200 a year.[19] In 1918, women teachers' salaries were raised to at least four-fifths of the rate paid to men of the same class, but the 'family obligations' of men continued to be recognised with higher salaries.[20] By 1920 the young male teacher received £3 per week, his female counterpart £2 8s. Annual increments over a five-year period raised this by nearly a pound a week. This meant that after training at the Teachers' College, and with five years of experience, a male head teacher earned only 6s 6d a week more than the basic wage. He earned significantly less than a head sawyer, faller or millwright, and the same as a sawmill labourer.[21]

For the Otway Saw Mills teacher, about one-quarter of his weekly salary was needed for boarding-house meals alone.[22] A correspondent to the *Colac herald* argued that the 'totally inadequate salaries' offered by the Education Department were the main reason for the difficulty in finding teachers to work in rural districts of Victoria. This resulted in the employment of 'an army of temporary or unskilled teachers who are receiving less remuneration than many of the lower paid hands in the timber mills of the Otway forest'.[23] The difficulty the Education Department had in filling the vacancy at Henry's Mill school during the 1920s may thus have been a systemic problem relating as much to unattractive pay scales as to the isolation and poor living conditions.

Initially, female teachers were explicitly excluded from appointment to the mill school. During the earliest negotiations for its establishment in 1905, the District Inspector noted the lack of suitable accommodation for a female teacher, and that a male teacher would be provided with a room rent-free. The boarding house at the mill could provide accommodation for neither men nor women, offering only meals at 13 shillings per week. Over time, male-only appointments became an established practice at the mill. Given the isolation of the settlement, and the generally brief stints of male teachers at Henry's Mill, it may have been felt that the location was too remote for female teachers to cope with. However, single women routinely worked at schools in nearby towns such as Forrest and Barwon Downs, and at other mill schools at least as isolated as Henry's. Blanche Murphy, for example, applied successfully for a position at the Rubicon school in the Central Highlands. Her time at the mill was marred, however, by the climate, poor accommodation, lack of companionship, cost of living, and drunken pranks and language of some of the men.[24] Alice Hartley was the only teacher posted to the Loch Fyne Mine school near Matlock, in the Central Highlands, from 1899 to 1902, an extremely remote and rugged location.[25] The reluctance to appoint women to the school at Henry's Mill is also anomalous because with so many tiny rural schools opening and closing in this era, finding teachers to staff them was a constant challenge for the Education Department. Forest-based mill settlements were not necessarily any more isolated than many other rural settlements at some distance from towns, railways and roads.



Locomotive and horse team on Henry's tramline, c. 1908. Courtesy of Birregurra District Historical Centre.

Comments made by teachers about the isolated location of the mill school reveal a consistently negative response to the local environment. This may also hint at their response to the social environment of the sawmill community. Bernard Flood, for example, in applying for transfer, felt that

For months at a time, a teacher is practically a prisoner in the gully, for he cannot get away, even on weekends, on account of the remoteness of the district.[26]

Even the mill owner, WR Henry, acknowledged that the site was 'in an almost inaccessible Forest',[27] while a District School Inspector noted the 'wet weather, 6 months practically of very wet weather, and the mountainous character of the country'.[28] Another inspector recorded that the school was 'situated in an inaccessible part of the forest. There is no road to it; no horse can get over the mountains. The only way in is from Forrest by a sawmill tram'.[29] As noted earlier, the remoteness of the mill had been used as a justification for establishing the school in the first place, as it was 'situated in a lonely, narrow valley ... The children are quite isolated'.[30] The school's first teacher, Leo O'Kelly, had argued for a full-time position because the mill lay 'in a solitude entirely cut off from Forrest and Barramunga'.[31]

Teachers were constantly asking for transfers. The average length of appointment was fifteen months, the shortest being seven weeks and the longest slightly less than three years, by Clifford Stanford (1910-1912) and Charles Branditt (1919-1922).[32] The range of excuses employed by teachers as grounds for transfer provide further insight into their responses to the social and geographical environment of the mill community. Teachers nearly always requested removal

from the school, rather than pay rises or allowances to compensate for the isolation. In several cases teachers appear simply to have ceased duty without permission or explanation, possibly unable to tolerate the delay in appointing a replacement. Several were unhappy with the board and accommodation available at Henry's Mill, which involved either a hut in the school yard or boarding privately with one of the mill families. William Morris, for example, head teacher for a short stint in 1912 and 1913, was reduced to sleeping in a bed with one of his students.[33] Morris later blamed the damp climate for his contracting influenza and neuralgia, and used this as grounds for transfer to a warmer, inland place such as Ballarat or the Western District.[34]

Bernard Flood was prompted in 1914 to apply for transfer on account of the extreme isolation of the mill settlement and the impossibility of doing further study, along with the poor accommodation, damp climate and its effect on his health.[35] Several teachers were also intent on marriage and were reluctant to bring their brides to a school without a proper dwelling. This was a concern shared by soldier settlers on isolated blocks between the wars, conscious that a tent or humpy was not a fit home for a woman.[36] Cecil Wallis complained of the financial burden imposed by providing separately for his wife and child at Geelong, and himself at the mill.[37] The pursuit or successful attainment of further teaching qualifications, especially the 'Second Class Certificate', was also cited as a reason for transfer to another teaching post.[38]

Charles F Branditt taught at Otway Saw Mills School between December 1919 and October 1922. Alone among teachers at the mill, Branditt appears to have felt some sympathy for the community in which he worked. There is no evidence of him complaining to the Education Department concerning living or working conditions, and he submitted no requests for transfer. The reasons for his departure are not recorded. His portrayal of the mill in two articles contributed to the regional school magazine *Forest, lake, and plain*, while romanticised, is nevertheless sympathetic to the trials and difficulties of life at the remote site.[39] His positive response undoubtedly owed much to the presence of his wife, Nina, and perhaps to the fact that, fresh from the Rural School Training College, he had no previous teaching experience to compare with his first posting. Although their residential arrangements are not known, Nina's annual income of £40 as the school sewing mistress meant that the couple also enjoyed a higher household income than teachers before or after them.

Branditt describes a number of social events at the mill which utilised the schoolroom. One of these was a project to purchase books. This may well have been a common occurrence in this era, when hundreds of rural schools were established across the state to provide education for Victorian children. The Rubicon mill school in the Central Highlands, for example, was supported in 1925 by a donation of 200 books from the Children's Library League of Victoria.[40] Correspondence indicates that the Education Department was generally willing to meet requests for desks and blackboards, but unwilling to provide books for school children. It is unclear whether this was a response to financial stringency, or a reflection of a teaching philosophy which promoted pedagogy over independent reading and learning. Otway Saw Mills had to rely upon social evenings on alternate Saturdays, and a school bazaar at Christmas, to acquire books for its pupils.

Preparations for the Christmas bazaar were under way months before the event. The girls, taught by Nina Branditt, sewed prizes for the occasion. The boys raised young plants to sell to mill residents and made dolls' cradles from lolly boxes. They also erected an 'Aunt Sally', a painted figure of a woman smoking a pipe, and on the day offered small prizes for a knock-down at four shots for threepence. Mothers baked cakes and toffee, and made up jars of lollies and peanuts. The needlework pieces made by the sewing class were auctioned, before the schoolroom was cleared for the dance. Almost £30 was raised to buy books.

Charles and Nina Branditt stand out for the leadership and energy they provided in promoting a sense of common purpose at the mill settlement. None of the other teachers ever made such an investment in community life at Henry's Mill. Edward O'Connor was unusual in being the only teacher at the site ever to request transfer to an even remoter school, apparently because the location of the Old Federal Mill, beyond Warburton at Starvation Creek, was an area with which he was already familiar.[41] It is doubtful, however, whether many of the other teachers at Henry's Mill appreciated the admiration felt for them by the Secretary of Education, Frank Tate. Secure in his Melbourne office, Tate clearly idealised their toils and struggle in remote places. Enduring the 'hardships and lonely life of the pioneers' was probably a fate most teachers hoped to escape as quickly as possible.[42]

Several incidents reveal that the school sometimes attracted less able teachers. Edward Prendergast, for example, accidentally locked seven-year-old William Wilkinson in the schoolhouse after hours.

With the river swollen by winter rains, concern over the boy's disappearance abated only when he appeared hours later, injured, having crawled from a window. Prendergast was severely reprimanded by the Department for his 'gross carelessness' and negligence. [43] Clifford Stanford was required to remedy defects identified in his teaching, while Francis Shine was judged by the District Inspector as 'inexperienced and ... doing fair work only'.[44] Bernard Flood was rebuked for his extreme action in suspending Gladys Butcher for disobedience, and warned to 'use sounder judgment in future in the maintenance of [school] discipline'.[45] Frequent delays in the appointment of replacement teachers for the Otway Saw Mills School also indicate that it was not a highly sought-after appointment, and that most teachers avoided it if possible.

Although complaints by teachers about the isolation of the mill had lessened by the 1920s, the Education Department found it increasingly difficult to attract applicants when the teaching post at Otway Saw Mills fell vacant. It acknowledged the difficulty in keeping a teacher at the school during the winter months, and there were several periods when the school was closed mid-year for weeks at a time while a replacement teacher was sought.[46] In mid-1926 no schooling was provided for more than two months until a temporary teacher could be found to fill the vacancy. The position was advertised at least eleven times before attracting any applicant.[47] A similar situation prevailed early the following year, prompting the school committee to criticise the reluctance of young teachers to leave the city, and thereby depriving 'Country Children of their right to a decent schooling'.[48]

In many respects Otway Saw Mills 3601 was typical of the thousands of one-teacher bush schools dotted around Australia by the early twentieth century. The letters of excuse penned by its teachers have much in common with the fears and anguish expressed by numerous other teachers appointed to similarly remote settlements.[49] The 'bush schoolies' trod a common path in leaving home to attend a training institution before venturing to another community, entrusted with the task of training the young. Many felt trapped in the isolated districts to which they were appointed, cut off from family, friends and colleagues, unable to cash a cheque or visit a shop for weeks at a time. In struggling to adapt to life in tiny, remote settlements and teach a highly regulated curriculum, their efforts provided the basis of an education for many thousands of young Australians in this period.

Endnotes

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- [5] *ibid.*, 1 June 1905.
- [6] *ibid.*, 25 September 1905.
- [7] Petition for establishment of a State School at Otway Saw Mills, to WA Cavanagh (District Inspector), *ibid.*, 7 July 1908.
- [8] Leo C O'Kelly to Secretary for Education, PROV, VPRS 640/P1, Unit 2245, File 3601, 27 January 1909.
- [9] PROV, VPRS 795/P0, Unit 1927, File 3601, 9 October 1911.
- [10] JG Johnstone to Secretary for Education, PROV, VPRS 795/P0, Unit 2812, File 3601, 3 March 1916, 8 March 1916.
- [11] *ibid.*, 27 February 1923.
- [12] Cecil Turner to Secretary for Education, PROV, VPRS 640/P1, Unit 2423, File 3601, 23 September 1915.
- [13] John Murphy to John Cain, PROV, VPRS 640/P1, Unit 1671, File 4031, 4 February 1921.
- [14] Quoted in LJ Blake, *Vision and realisation: a centenary history of state education in Victoria*, 3 vols, Education Department of Victoria, Melbourne, 1973, vol. 3, p. 453.
- [15] *ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 329.
- [16] PROV, VPRS 795/P0, Unit 1927, File 3601, 7 July 1908; Unit 2812, File 3601, 3 March 1916, 23 February 1923.
- [17] PROV, VPRS 640/P1, Unit 2423, File 3601, 15 April 1916.
- [18] *The Birregurra times*, 22 October 1918.
- [19] Blake, vol. 1, p. 322.
- [20] *ibid.*, p. 326.
- [21] *The timber worker* (journal of the Amalgamated Timber Workers' Union of Australia, Victorian Branch), 26 April 1921.
- [22] Letter from A Cecil Wallis (teacher) to Secretary for Education, PROV, VPRS 640/P1, Unit 2639, File 3601, 3 May 1924.
- [23] *The Colac herald*, 14 June 1920.
- [24] PROV, VPRS 640/P1, Unit 1671, File 4031, 20 January 1921, 4 February 1921.
- [25] J Carroll, *The Upper Yarra: an illustrated history*, Shire of Upper Yarra, Yarra Junction, Victoria, 1988, p. 90.
- [26] Bernard E Flood to Secretary for Education, PROV, VPRS 640/P1, Unit 2423, File 3601, 27 October 1914.
- [27] WR Henry to Secretary for Education, PROV, VPRS 795/P0, Unit 1927, File 3601, 2 October 1909.
- [28] District Inspector's report to Secretary for Education, *ibid.*, 9 January 1905.
- [29] G Parker (District Inspector) to Secretary for Education, PROV, VPRS 640/P1, Unit 2423, File 3601, 1 May 1915.
- [30] WA Cavanagh (District Inspector) to Secretary for Education, PROV, VPRS 795/P0, Unit 1927, File 3601, 11 July 1908.
- [31] Leo O'Kelly to Secretary for Education, *ibid.*, 23 October 1909.
- [32] Index to Inward Registered Primary Schools Correspondence, summarising especially the appointment of teachers, PROV, VA 714 Education Department, VPRS 915/P0 Index to Inward Registered Primary Schools Correspondence, Unit 169, File 3601.
- [33] William A Morris to Secretary for Education, PROV, VPRS 640/P1, Unit 2328, File 3601, 7 October 1912.
- [34] William A Morris to Secretary for Education, *ibid.*, 10 February, 16 June 1913.
- [35] Bernard E Flood to Secretary for Education, PROV, VPRS 640/P1, Unit 2423, File 3601, 27 October 1914.
- [36] M Lake, *The limits of hope: soldier settlement in Victoria 1915-38*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1987, p. 155.
- [37] AC Wallis to Secretary for Education, PROV, VPRS 640/P1, Unit 2639, File 3601, 3 May 1924.
- [38] Charles F Branditt to Secretary for Education, PROV, VPRS 640/P1, Unit 2563, File 3601, 1 February 1922.
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[41] Edward C O'Connor to Secretary for Education, PROV, VPRS 640/P1, Unit 2639, File 3601, 1 November 1926.

[42] Quoted in Blake, vol. 1, p. 339.

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[45] Education Department to Bernard Flood, *ibid.*, 31 March 1915.

[46] Cecil Turner to Secretary for Education, PROV, VPRS 640/P1, Unit 2639, File 3601, 23 June 1924.

[47] Education Department to WR Henry, *ibid.*, 9 June 1926.

[48] Cecil Turner to Secretary for Education, PROV, VPRS 640/P1, Unit 2737, File 3601, 7 March 1927.

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