

Displaced Persons

An alien workforce¹

One of the most interesting periods in the history of Queensland Forestry occurred in the years during and after the Second World War. With all Australia involved in the war effort, the construction of defence installations placed a heavy burden on timber supplies. Forestry was regarded as an essential industry and measures were taken to ensure that timber was made available for the war effort.

As the male labour force shrunk, European prisoners of war were used to harvest Queensland's timber. Prisoners of war were sent to the Mary Valley as well as the Brigalow district around Chinchilla. The need for timber became even greater for reconstruction after the war. Housing shortages placed a huge demand on wood supplies but the workforce to cut the timber was not available.

The solution came in the form of European refugees, officially referred to at the time as displaced persons. The Australian Government agreed to accept these people in July 1947. While millions of war refugees were resettled in the intervening period, about one million refused to return to their homelands. The majority of these displaced persons came from Eastern Europe and remained in holding camps in central Europe after the war.

There were, however, a number of conditions placed on the agreement between the Australian government and the United Nations who coordinated the Displaced Persons Mass Resettlement Scheme. People entering Australia had to agree to work for two years in any employment as directed by the Commonwealth Government. Essential industries in Queensland included the sugar industry and forestry. After this two-year contract expired, displaced persons were allowed to find their own employment. The scheme operated between 1947 and 1952.

During this time, between 6000 and 8000 men and women were employed in Queensland. About 1000 were employed by the Department of Forestry. This workforce peaked during 1950 when more than 650 men were employed, primarily in the massive reafforestation program undertaken by the department.

The largest concentrations of forestry-employed displaced persons were at Imbil, Amamoor, Widgee, Gallangowan, Yarraman, Benarkin, Blackbutt, Colinton, Chinchilla, Elgin Vale, Atherton, and Beerburrum. While some workers objected to the remoteness of the work and gravitated to coastal towns and cities, others remained employed by the Forestry Department after their contract had expired.

¹ Written by John Schavio on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Forestry in Queensland

Foreign Legion, Stirlings Crossing and Balts' Camp – Imbil²³

Foreign Legion Camp

As Imbil this was the first area in which commercial plantations were established in Queensland, it was used as a centre for the training of Forest Rangers and Overseers. In fact E.H.F. Swain recommended in 1917 that a Forestry School be established at Imbil. The Forest trainees were housed in camps established throughout the forest. The closest camp to Imbil was near the Forest Station and the furthest camp was 11 km away (about 3 km south of Stirlings Crossing). Because it was so isolated trainees housed at this camp nicknamed it 'The Foreign Legion'.

Although it is not clear when this camp was established it is known that it was operational in 1936–37. With the exception of one married man who lived in a house near this camp single men at 'The Foreign Legion' lived in tents. The overseer in charge of these men was Mr Jack Donald. He and his family lived at Butler's corner and Jack rode a horse to the Foreign Legion's camp (Noel Donald – Jack's son *pers comm*).

The name 'The Foreign Legion' was a readymade name for the European migrants who camped near the same area soon after they arrived at Imbil after the end of World War 2.

Stirlings Crossing and the Balts' Camp

Named after Bob Stirling, an early settler, the Stirlings Crossing Forestry Camp existed between 1947 and 1977. This camp was occupied by single and married men.

Post WW2 Australia accepted 182 000 displaced persons from many countries, especially those of Central and Eastern Europe. The Queensland Forest Service employed a number of these people to relieve the shortage of manpower needed to establish its plantations. The result was the recruitment of refugees from European countries such as the Ukraine, Yugoslavia and Croatia and people from the Baltic countries, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. As some of these people came from the Baltic countries there were given the general name of Balts. The resettlement scheme ensured that they work in the forests for two years after which they were free to do whatever they wished. In reality, many remained with forestry while others went on to work on the Snowy River Hydro-Electric Scheme. By 1949, there were over 400 of these men working in Queensland's forests.

Near Stirling's Crossing – itself the site of a camp mostly for native-born Australians, but not exclusively so – 150 Balts lived in primitive tent conditions and worked in the plantations. These immigrant men put much needed effort into the Imbil plantation program and their labours were not forgotten. Although the main Balt camp was some distance from Stirlings Crossing camp a commemorative planting of Eucalypt trees on the now deserted Stirlings Crossing site is testimony to their contribution.

The Balts would have appreciated this little anecdote taken from the 1980s some years after the demise of the bustling community at Stirlings Crossing: The ceremony at the commemorative planting honoured the fine work of the Balts in the plantations in earlier times. Each planted Eucalypt species had a large sign erected in front showing the botanical name of the young tree; for example, *E. maculata* or *E. pilularis*. After the speeches a tour of the grounds was made. A young and rather naïve reporter from Gympie was overheard to comment, 'Isn't it remarkable that the men who worked here all had names beginning with the letter E.' Well, yes. Eric Maculata and Ernie Pilularis!

Some comments on those early days from Anna Lockwood:

'They would always dress up in their best clothes on Sunday, even if they had nowhere to go. They were always rugged up, even when it was very hot ...

² Australia's Ever-changing Forests IV Fourth National Conference on Australia's Forest History *Australian Forest History Society Inc* Gympie 18 – 22 April 1999 Field Trip to Imbil Tuesday 20 April 1999 Tour Notes Peter V. Holzworth with John Huth

³ Map courtesy of Peter Cook

Some of the DP's (displaced persons as the "Balts" were also called) worked harder as they thought that they would be promoted that way. The system did not work that way otherwise some of them would have been Prime Minister in two or three weeks! The other workers in the forestry would tell the men to "Stop working so hard! You'll tire yourselves out!"

The children did not have any money for store-bought toys, so they made their own toys out of anything that they could lay their hands onto. They would make boats out of black bean seed shells and sail them down the river as a regatta ...'

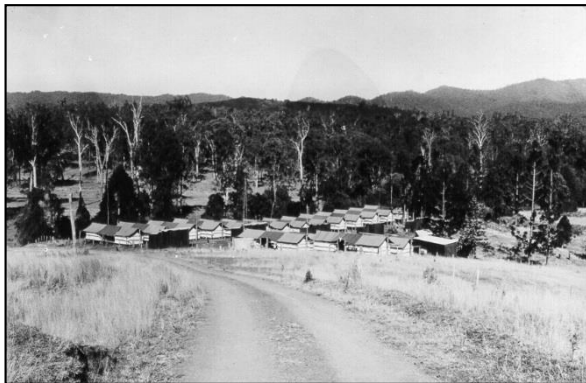
Although geographically segregated (see map), labourers from the Stirlings Camp and the Balts' Camp did the same work in the plantations which included planting, weeding, chipping and cutting of timber with the use of axes, crosscut saws, brush hooks and lots of muscle. They also built fire lines and roads



Single men's barracks Stirlings Crossing – June 1949



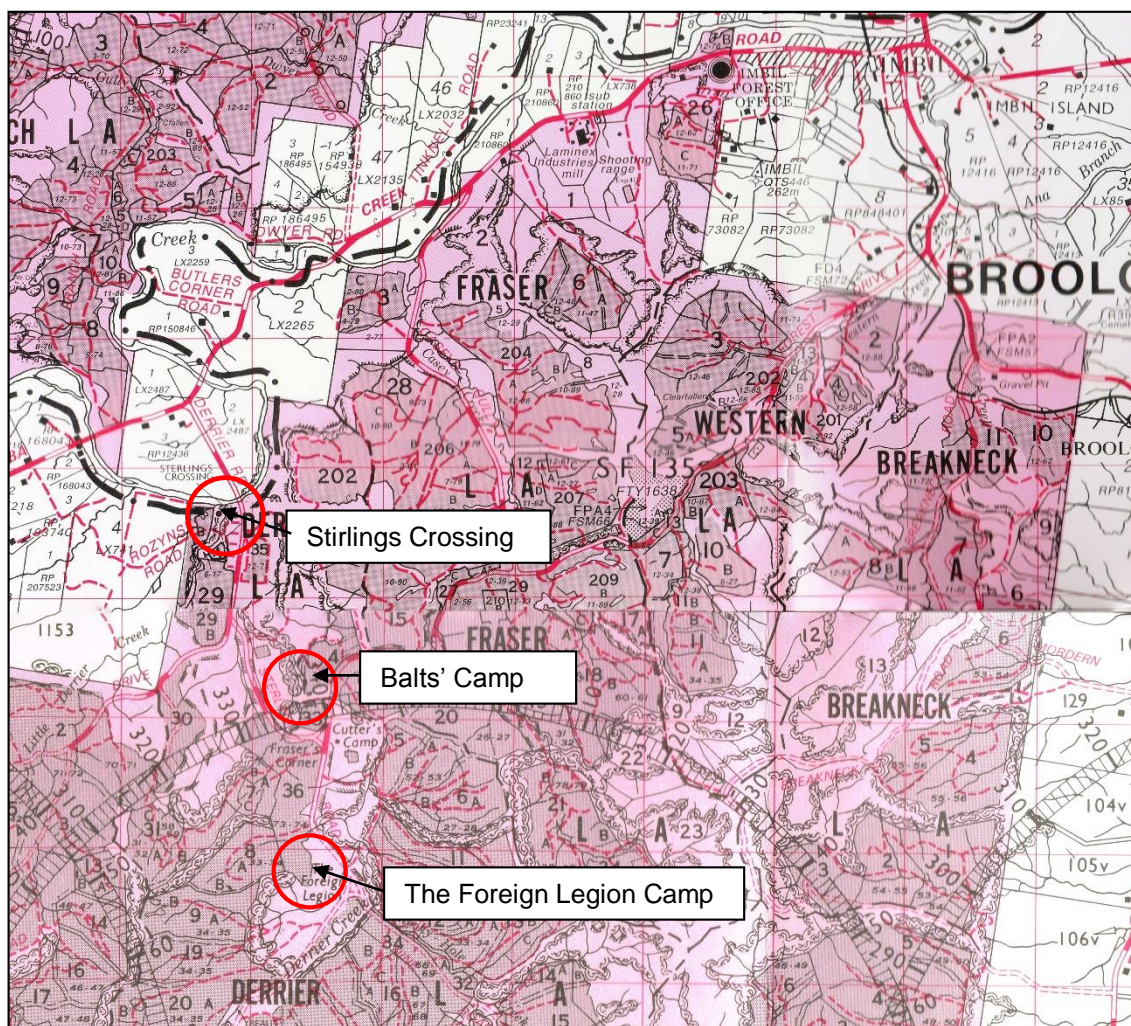
Married men's barracks Stirlings Crossing – April 1959



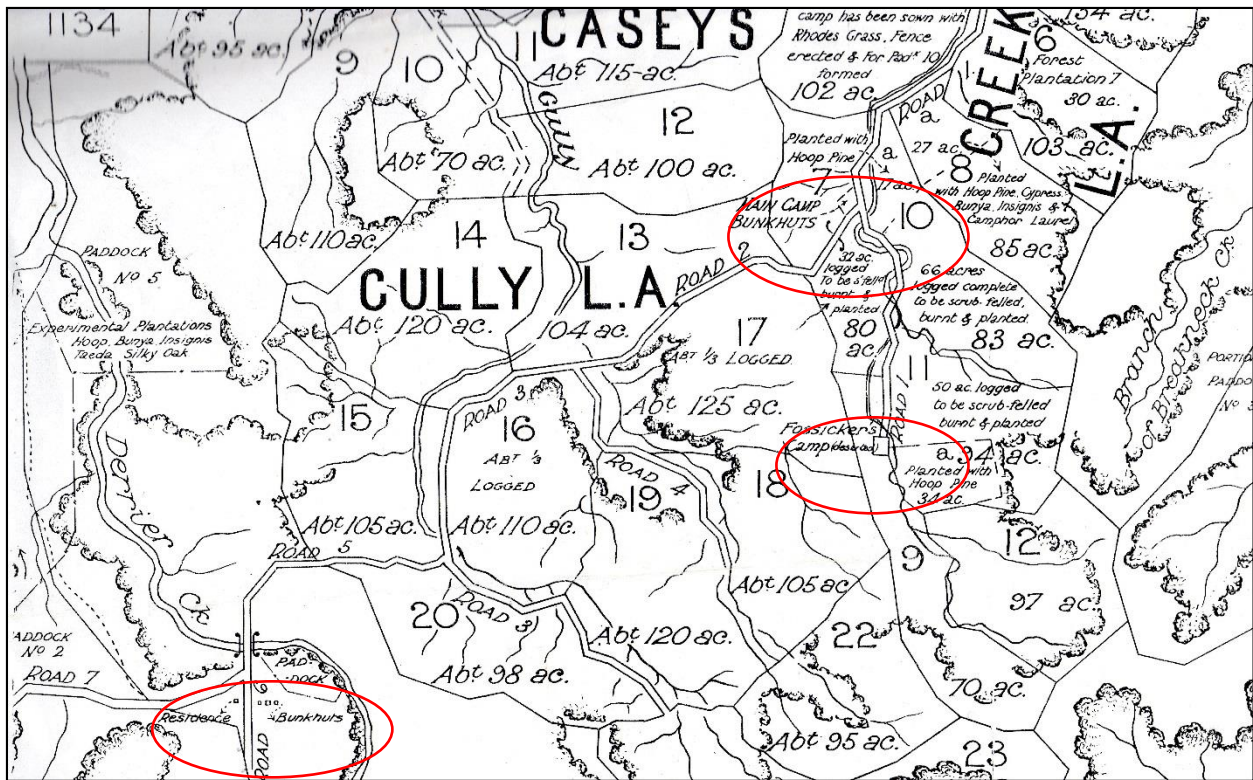
Balts' camp in the Imbil District – June 1949



Slack season for cane workers. Displaced Persons employed in forestry activities Elgin Vale – 1949-50



Location of Stirlings Crossing Camp (26.493 °S, 152.626 °E), the Balt's Camp (26.507 °S, 152.633 °S and the Foreign Legion Camp (26.518 °S, 152.635 °E) – Imbil State Forest



An old map (date unknown) of Caseys LA, Imbil showing three camps.



Fireline construction, Caseys Gully – 1931

Trifun Pejich – Displaced Person from Yugoslavia⁴

Trifin's story as told to Pat Towner

In the early days of Australian history, most of the names on the electoral roll sounded very British but shortly after World War 2 names began to appear that were very hard to pronounce like Trzaskowska and Bogdanko. These new arrivals in Australia had formerly been lumped together under the title 'displaced persons' in European countries where there were thousands of such people, without homes or jobs.

The forestry industry had taken off in the Gympie area and the government of the day introduced a scheme to get much needed workers. They would bring young European men and their families in as emigrants and set them up in housing and brand new jobs.



Trifun Pejich (above left) with other migrant workers. All with their water bags on their first day at work in the Forestry Department at Stirlings Crossing near Imbil

One of these workers was Trifin Pejich who was born in 1931 in Yugoslavia. Trifin's father died when he was six years old. He lived in a very cold climate, had no electricity and walked five kilometres through snow everyday to school. One of his brothers died when he tipped over a kerosene lamp (his other brother was older) but despite all this Trifin had a very happy childhood. After his schooling was completed Trifin, still too young for war service answered an advertisement for workers in Germany and worked in a munitions factory throughout the years of the war. He never saw his mother or older sister again.

After the war finished the factory was dismantled and used as a hostel for hundreds of displaced persons while the country was being made safe and habitable. Trifin was among them. The people were fed food parcels provided by the allied forces and treated very well.

By now Trifin had married and his wife Stanuslava and he were eager to grasp an opportunity to try out a new life in Australia. Trifin left his wife and one little daughter, Edna, behind and sailed from Italy in August 1948, bound for Queensland and a job in the forestry department. His family would follow him twelve months later. The voyage terminated in Melbourne and those heading north were put on a train for Queensland. Trifin was taken directly to Imbil where he lived in a forestry camp at Stirlings Crossing in a tent with a canvas top and wooden sides. On arrival in Melbourne the men had been issued with new clothes, boots and hats



The 'bus' used to transport workers and children from Stirlings Crossing to Imbil

⁴ An abridged version of an article 'A fortunate life' by Pat Towner, *The Gympie Times*, Saturday April 25 2003 page 23. Photographs in this article scanned from the copies in *The Gympie Times*.

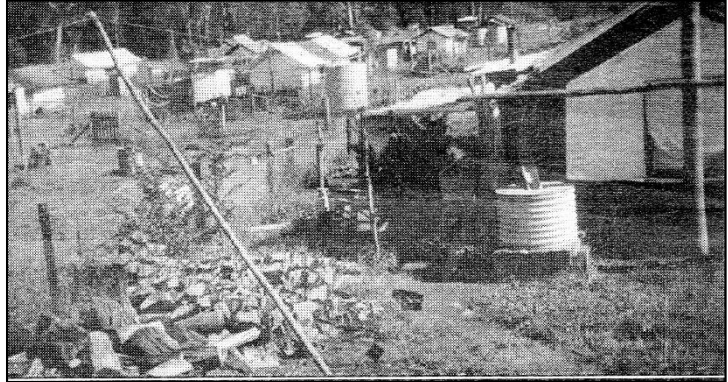
and once at Imbil were given new canvas water bags. These were a complete mystery to the men and they had to be shown that they were to be filled with water.

Trifin learnt to speak English by correspondence from lessons set in Brisbane and the men travelled to Imbil by 'bus' which was an open truck with high sides, to attend Saturday night dances.

Life was good. From the very first day Trifin accepted his new way of life and did not for one moment regret his decision to come to Australia. After twelve months, Stanislava and Erna joined Trifin and, as their marriage had been conducted overseas by a celebrant the first thing they did after her arrival was to remarry in a proper church at St. Patrick's Catholic Church in Gympie.

Edna loved her new life. The forestry camp had many young families and there were plenty of other children to play with. School aged youngsters were taken into Imbil by the 'bus'.

Edna and the other children learnt English much faster than their parents and many helped their mums and dads with language difficulties. Even with this help it took Trifin a couple of years to learn to speak and understand the English language.



Balts camp – 1950s

Trifin decided to try life in Brisbane for a time and got a job as a waiter in a nightclub. With his proximity to too many other women, Stanislava decided that this was not a good idea and the family moved back to Imbil and forestry work once more.

By now the family had grown and Trifin and Stanislava had two other daughters Isobel and Monica, then their youngest child a son David.

Work in the forestry covered many different forms, from chipping and planting to growing and tending young trees. Trifin led a gang which cleaned between rows of trees but later began tubing. Young pines were transplanted into metal tubes and planted in trays twenty six tubes to a tray [sic]. Trifin became very adept at tubing and could handle a tray of young plants in two and a half minutes. His name was written up in the shed as 'Champion Tuber'.

Trifin left the forestry and moved to Gympie in 1960. He worked for the Widgee Shire for the next twenty-five years. His wife Stanislava died in 1999.

Australia has been good to its migrant families. Trifin believes this is a wonderful country, never short of anything. Australia gave him a brand new start, for which he is grateful. He has no regrets and has loved every minute of his life here in Gympie.

Trifin passed away on 8 August 2007

PEJICH, Trifun. Late of Davies Lane, Gympie. Passed away peacefully, 8th August, 2007. Aged 86 years. Beloved Husband of Stanislava "Stacey" (Dec'd). Dearly loved Father and Father-in-law of Nadezda and Noel Prowd, Izabela and Ken Harrison, Monica and David Berry, David and Maria Pejich. Much loved Grandad of Mark, Leisa and Andrew Prowd, Luke and Carla Harrison and Great-grandad of Jy and Angus. Relatives and Friends of Trifun and Family are respectfully invited to attend His Funeral Service to be held in St. Patrick's Catholic Church, Church Street, Gympie, on Tuesday, 14th August, 2007 at 10.00 a.m. followed by a Graveside Committal Service at Gympie Cemetery

