

Corinella by P.M. 17th Feb 1877 The Age Pg 7

A few months ago attention was called by a correspondent in The Leader to the excellent quality of the land still unselected at Corinella, a district on the eastern shore of Western Port Bay; and to its general adaptability for grazing and agricultural purposes. Situated at a distance of over seventy miles from the metropolis, intending selectors and other visitors from Melbourne had, at that time, but small facilities afforded them for compassing the distance which divided them from this tempting Elysium. Either they must proceed to Cranbourne by Cobb's coach, and thence to Corinella – a distance of more than forty miles – by horse or on foot; or they must take the coach to Hastings, and cross the bay to their destination in an open sailing boat. Both these alternatives were, it need hardly be said, tedious and disagreeable. In winter the road beyond Cranbourne was nearly impassable to foot travelers, and on the other hand, the trip across the bay, though pleasant enough in time, was in rough weather a very damp and damping operation.

The facilities for the carriage of goods were on a still, more limited scale, and except in small bulk, they could only be transmitted by craft, at great risk of delay and damage. Since the appearance of the letter referred to, and partly no doubt as a result of the stimulus given to settlement in the district by the statements contained in that letter, some most important additions have been made to its means of intercommunication's and transit. Not only does a tri-weekly coach now run via Dandenong, Cranbourne, Tooraddin, and Tobin Yallock – from Melbourne to Grantville, performing the through journey in nine hours; but a company has been formed to run, and has run for some time past, a tri-weekly steamer from Hastings, whence it starts immediately on the arrival of Cobb's coach from Melbourne to Phillip Island and Griffith's point, which though not actually within the Corinella district is only three or four miles from it.

For my own part I had long wished to test by personal inspection the veracity or otherwise of the high flown statements which my Western Port acquaintances, when they emerged from their primeval solitude's and basked a while in the blaze of “town,” were always dinning into my ears with regard to the sport, scenery and material attractions of their district, and especially of the Corinella and Wollomai portions of it. Their pardonable “blow” was, it is true, confirmed by sporting pedestrians who had made the overland journey to Screw Creek, Anderson's Inlet and the Tarwin, and who returned laden not only with full bags, but with glowing panegyrics of the country through which they had passed. Nevertheless, being somewhat skeptical of the rural enthusiasm of town bred people, I received their reports *cum grano salis*, and determined to bide my time, and see for myself.

So the other day – it does not do to be too precise as to dates – I packed up my traps, paid my fare and got up onto the box seat of the new vehicle.

The day was fine, and the roads in a favourable state of dryness, so that we bowled along past Dandenong to Cranbourne, not only pleasantly enough, but at a smart pace. After leaving Cranbourne the condition of the road changed for the worse, and a

disagreeable amount of jolting had to be endured. At about five o'clock p.m., however, the Grantville terminus was reached, and I was at liberty to descend from my lofty perch.

Having had some refreshment, I inspected the one "Lion" of Grantville, its jetty, along which runs an exceedingly well constructed tramway, connecting it with the saw mills of Messrs. Brazier and Co., situate in the ranges, about three and a half miles east of the township.

Having duly admired the jetty, and still more the view of the bay from it, I returned to the hotel. There was still an hour or more of daylight so I determined to push on at once to my precise destination, the Bass river sawmills. I had pitched upon these mills as my point of departure, partly because I had some previous acquaintance with the proprietors, Messrs., Crump and Grant, but more especially from the fact that, being situated close to the Bass river, and in the very heart of the unselected country, I expected to find in their immediate neighbourhood the fairest possible sample of its alleged attractions.

The bar was crowded with Christmas revelers of of whom I inquired the distance and the best way to the mills. The former, he informed me was four and a half miles, the latter he said he would be happy to show me if I would accept his company, as he was himself going to start for the mills in a few minutes, and did not care for a lonely walk. I thanked him for the information and his offer, which I of course accepted. Unfortunately for the good intentions of my new acquaintance, first one old friend accosted him and then another--"nobbler" following "nobbler" and "about" "shout" until it was almost dusk, and yet we had not started. Every moment he expressed himself as "just going," and yet seemed fated not to go. I at last saw that if I meant to get to the mills that night I must march alone. I therefore collected what information I could from the bystanders, who pointed out a track to which I was to keep until I found myself on one of the tramways leading to the mills. I then started off. When I had got a little way I heard a noise and looked back. It was my would-be guide, upbraiding me for my desertion. The road I took led me along, in a south westerly direction, through a messmate forest, then it emerged on to a vast heath and finally involved me in a belt of timber, which so far as I could discern by the dim light, which soon became "black darkness," was also composed of messmates.

I had already walked above three miles from Grantville, when I discovered to my disgust, that I had wandered from the track, which about this point, as I was afterwards aware, becomes greatly narrowed, and diverges to the right towards the tramway, for which I was making. For some time I blundered on in the darkness, hoping that I might either regain the pathway, or by good luck stumble across the tramway aforesaid. All in vain, however, and, after plunging up to my knees in a morass, from which I with difficulty extricated myself, and finally precipitating myself over what I felt, but could not see to be the trunk of a huge fallen tree, I resigned myself to the fact of being "bushed", and began to feel out, with my hands and feet, a soft dry spot for my bed. Just as this forlorn moment the crying of a child-- a sound usually so irritating, now so

soothing to my supperless senses – smote upon my tympanum. I made in the direction indicated, but only discerned when close up to it the dim outline of a bush dwelling, from within which issued at intervals the mingled voices of a male and female engaged in earnest conversation. Had I been of a nervous or a imaginative turn, I might have pictured this obscure habitation as the abode of some Western Port Sullivan; this unseen pair as an abandoned couple, plotting vile schemes for the murder and pillage of belated travelers like myself – and trembled accordingly. And, indeed, the surroundings, the dark night, the dense forest, the solitary cottage, the enviable speakers, my way worn self, would have been admirably calculated to sustain such an illusion, if once entertained. But, being of an eminently matter of fact disposition, I did not suffer my fancy to stray, and simply knocked at the door. A man's voice told me to come in. I obeyed, and saw before me nothing more sensational than a highly benevolent looking “Darby and Joan,” seated at supper. Having explained to them my position, the “missus” invited me to partake with them, to which – looking to the state of the board, which in honor of the Christmas season, was spread with unusual profusion – I was nothing loath, the husband, meantime, undertaking to see me, when I had done, as far as the tramway. Thus cheered, I set to with a will, and having satisfied myself, and made my acknowledgments to my entertainers, was soon again on my way, my host preceding me with a lantern – a necessary equipment on so dark a night, and with a track so tortuous and indistinguishable to follow.

We wound up a steep acclivity, through masses of tangled brushwood, and amongst timber which even by the lanterns flickering glare, I could see to be of giant size and height. Our feet struck noiselessly upon the turf. The growls of native bears, and the occasional plaintive cry of the mopohawk alone disturbed the intense stillness of the night.

We seemed alone in an illimitable wilderness and I could not help thinking how completely I should stand at the mercy of my guide, were he animated by sinister intentions against my life or purse. A glance at his jolly, rollicking countenance dispelled all such thoughts as they arose, and at this moment, to my great satisfaction, the long sought tramway was at length reached. The mills were only a mile distant, so, having bidden a cordial adieu to my friendly guide, I hastened on with the elastic step of one who sees before him the end of his troubles. At first I tried to walk upon one of the rails of the tramway, but my unaccustomed feet constantly slipped off. I then essayed to step from sleeper to sleeper, but often miscalculated my distance, and stepped into the muddy pools, which recent rains had created between each pair, and which the rails on either side prevented from running off. The walk was thus far from a pleasant one, so that it was with no small satisfaction that, in about half an hour, having meantime crossed the Bass, I discovered the mill lights gleaming an amicable welcome from the bottom of the gorge in which I was. I hurried on, and was soon seated in the hospitable – I cannot say “mansion” – but very comfortable habitation of one of the partners, who cordially recognised my claims upon his consideration.

After an hour or two allotted to a “yarn” and a “smoke” – to the communication of town

news, and the reception of country items – we adjourned to an adjoining hut, which had been fitted up as an impromptu ballroom, and in which a number of the men employed about the mill, together with the females of their families were engaged (inevitable quotation !) in “tripping it on the light fantastic toe,” to the music of a concertina. My feet were by this time encased in borrowed boots of extreme roominess, and besides I was in no mood for dancing, the walk having left me tired; so, though pressed to join, I contented myself with the part of a philosophic “wallflower”. Mr Lowe would have considered the pirouetting far from scientific, but what was lost in art was gained in energy. Mutual courtesy marked the proceedings, and the conduct of those assembled was, to say the least, as decorous as that which I witnessed at the last “Governor’s Ball,” “The proceedings were,” need I say it, “prolonged with great spirit to a late hour.” All then retired to rest.

The hut which I was to occupy for the night was divided from the remainder of the mill buildings by a broad gully, across which, nearly opposite to the hut door, a tree had conveniently fallen, forming a natural bridge, easily traversed by day, but, from its extreme roughness and narrowness, and the absence of any side rail, somewhat dangerous by night. This bridge, which, abandoning the dignity of the perpendicular, I crossed upon hands and knees. I could not help regarding as an amusing testimony to the habitual sobriety of the previous inmate, who would otherwise have protected himself by the erection of a more finished structure from the fatal consequences of a lost equilibrium. As I lay awake I could not avoid wishing myself permanently located in my temporary abode, far from city cares, deprived by the near whist not intrusive presence of other human creatures of that dismal sense of utter isolation which confronts one in the remote bush. These desires were by no means dissipated when I looked by day upon what I had only dimly appreciated the previous night. The gorge in which the mill lay was, I found, thickly timbered on both sides, principally by blue gums of great height and girth. These forest giants, which even in the gullies of Gippsland one seldom sees surpassed, shot up perfectly straight to a height of seventy feet without a branch, the total height being in some cases over 250 feet, and averaging at least 150. In their branches birds of various kinds – paroquets, parrots of all hues (lories, blue mountains, &c.) – fluttered and chattered; at their feet flourished graceful tree ferns without number, and a vegetation tropical in its luxuriance and variety; whilst every breeze brought down the gorge an odor of musk, realising all that one has read of the “scented gales” of fabled lands.

The stroke of the “faller’s” axe, the groans of the mill engines, and the roar of escaping steam mingled, it is true, with the natural sounds, but struck one with no sense of incongruity. Labour and nature seemed in their right places, hand in hand.

I thought the locality admirably suited for the site of a teetotal arcadia – there being no public houses within three or four miles – or one of those communities, half laboring, half literary, so often attempted in America.

It seemed a spot where crime might shelter itself from all risk of detection, and sorrow bury itself in a real, because busy, oblivion!

I was conducted round the mill premises, which comprise, beside the mill buildings, stables and sheds, – some five and twenty houses, occupied by the employes – in itself a complete settlement. I also inspected the machinery and appliances used by Messrs. Crump and Grant in the conduct of their business, but need only say that they are similar to those to be seen at the Grantville Mill, to which I have already alluded, and in all other saw mills of the same class. The timber – blue gum – obtained by Messrs. Crump and Grant from the ranges is, I was told, best adapted for what are technically termed “bending” purposes, and equals American hickory as a material for axe handles. It is also suitable for carriage building, but it has been principally utilised – and that by the governments of Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia, and New Zealand – for purposes in connection with the construction of railways, wharves and jetties. The Queen’s wharf, Melbourne, is now it may be remarked, being repaired with timber from these mills. Bluegum is also, next to oak and teak, one of the best woods for employment in ship building.

A craft of some seventy tons has recently been constructed by Mr. Alexander Stewart J.P. of Queensferry, the original proprietor of the Bass River Saw-mills, and the first pioneer of the district, out of timber supplied by Messrs. Crump and Grant, and is remarkable as being the second vessel – and that at an interval of twenty years – ever launched upon Western Port Bay. It is to be hoped that this little craft may prove the herald of more substantial ventures of a similar kind. The amount of timber produced per week at the Bass River Saw-mills averages about 30,000 superficial feet. It is conveyed to the Queensferry jetty, whence it is shipped to its destination by a tramway some four and a half miles in length.

The number of men employed at the mills in various capacities is about thirty. Most of them are married, and of course mess at home. The single men are provided for by a resident caterer, who for 14s. A week, supplies them with three daily meals, of which tea, bread, and salt meat are the staple. They have thus a good margin out of their wages (£2 to £3 a week) for clothing, sundries, and, if desired, saving.

Kangaroos, opossums, wallabies and hares – to say nothing of pigeons and snipe – are very plentiful in the Bass district, and as most of the men are the owners of horses, dogs, or guns (all three of which are usually borrowed), they have ever facility for the enjoyment in their leisure time of the pleasures of the chase. The Bay also affords capitol swan and duck shooting.

The Bass River – distant about half a mile from the mill, and easily approachable by the tramway leading from thence to Queensferry – is full of fish, the best of which is the blackfish, weighing from four to six pounds, and in appearance something between a cod and a trout. There is thus plenty of employment for the angler, as well as the sportsman. In the evenings the men principally employ themselves in the curing and preparation of skins, in gymnastic exercises, or in gardening, and generally wind up – when a musician is procurable – with a dance.

Even when conversation proves the only resource the varied experiences of the men thus thrown together makes it far from a despicable one, and it is certainly a capitol school

for the aquirement of “bush” lore.

The details I have given respecting Messrs. Crump and Grant’s mills apply, I believe, almost equally to the other saw-mills in the district. So that on the whole, if to live in a sylvan paradise, to be well housed, well paid, well found, and not over worked, and in addition to have no lack of healthy sports and pastimes may claim to be ranked amongst the good things of life, the men employed on the mills refered to can hardly be considered badly off. I can only suggest that at each mill something in the nature of a newsroom should be added to the other resources of their leisure.

Later on, I walked for two or three miles up one of the tramways (of which there are ten miles in all in connection with Messrs. Crump and Grant’s mills) along which the timber felled in the ranges is brought down to the mills to be sawn. The character of the scenery, was very similar to that which I have described as appertaining to the mill gorge. I noticed interspersed amongst the other timber a large quantity of blackwood, very suitable for upholstery purposes, which I should have thought might be advantageously utilised, as well as the blue gum. I afterwards went down to the brink of the Bass, which, though only a small stream some twenty miles in length, boasts more than one fall of no inconsiderable beauty and magnitude. The land on its margin is certainly little, if anything, inferior in quality to that at Brandy creek. The greater proportion of it is, however, taken up. That in the ranges is scarcely less excellent, but the uneven nature of the country, the density of the scrub, and the extreem heaviness of the timber would necessitate the expenditure of vast labor and a large amount of money before it could be rendered available for agricultural or pastoral purposes. That so additional clog may be placed upon the enterprise necessary for its reclamation, the present restrictions on selection should be removed. When this is done, the thorough and prosperous settlement of the district can only be a question of time.

Coming down to Corinella somewhat sceptical of its attractions, I left it full of admiration for its natural beauties, and hopeful anticipation of its prosperous future. I should add that, whilst the school accommodation in the neighbourhood is good, the “spiritual destitution” is extreme. The religious provision would, however, no doubt keep pace with an increase of population. It is, after all, as Bishop Moorhouse says, only a question of pounds, shillings, and pence.