

Johnston, Emil Peter (obituary from The Forester, April 2015)

Emil Peter Johnston, 1920-2015

Emil Peter Johnston passed away in Launceston on 13 March 2015 aged 94.

Emil was born 29 June 1920 and spent his early childhood on the northwest coast of Tasmania at Burnie and Wynyard before attending St Virgils in Hobart as a boarder for his secondary education.

He completed his secondary schooling in 1938 at St. Patrick's College in Launceston, where only about 10 students studied to matriculation level.

Emil began his career in Forestry on the cusp of the outbreak of World War II. Commencing work with the Forestry Department of Tasmania in 1939, he received a scholarship to undertake a 2 year general Science Degree from the University of Tasmania. He then went to the original Australian Forestry School in Canberra in 1942 where he studied for another 2 years to graduate with a Bachelor of Forestry degree in 1943. It was in Canberra that he met his first love Angela.

His role, on return to the Forestry Department, was in the Planning Branch. Here he was involved with surveying and assessing areas in north-east Tasmania thought suitable to provide forestry jobs for servicemen returning from World War II. It didn't take long before Emil on a trip to Melbourne proposed to Angela on St Kilda beach. In July 1944 Emil commenced a 6 month secondment to Canberra (where Angela lived) which was engineered so the two could be together. They married in December of that year and honeymooned in a forestry hut at Pierces Creek plantation near Canberra!

In 1946, Emil was appointed Divisional Forester of the North-East Division of the newly created Forestry Commission based in Launceston. He was just 26 years of age, and was the only graduate forester in the Division for a number of years. His strength of character and dedication to his career as a forester was certainly put to the test here, and Emil passed with flying colours. Emil and Angela started their family here in 1946 living at first in a small flat before moving to the suburb of Riverside.

His main roles were to: organise and collect revenue from native forest sales; manage and control fires; and manage the softwood plantation estate, which had commenced in the late 1930s.

During this time, Emil made an immense contribution to forest management in the North East, by taking a leading role in assessment of the native forest estate and its sustainable yield. Although forest assessment was in its infancy, Emil developed a forester's feel for the magnitude of the native forest harvesting that was occurring and was of the view that substantial cuts in licences were required. As a result of his work, the Commissioners were convinced to make massive reductions in Exclusive Forest Permit allocations in the late 1960s

In the early 1960s, the North East Division was divided into four districts, (Scottsdale, Fingal, Launceston and Deloraine) each administered by a District Forester. Emil took on the role of Regional Forester in this new structure. The closure of several major coal mines in the Fingal Valley, and availability of Commonwealth loan funding, led to a rapid expansion of the softwood estate during the 1960s, predominantly employing displaced mine workers. Emil worked hard, with the District Foresters, to manage a rapidly expanding plantation estate and corresponding workforce numbers.

Native forest harvesting of sawlog and pulpwood in the Division was in excess of one million tonnes per year in the early 1960s with an increasing cut of *Pinus radiata*, exceeding 300,000 tonnes each year. Emil had a great interest in the regeneration problems of the native forests of the north east of Tasmania and the various research trials conducted in his region. He was of the belief that a significant change in the management of the forests was required in order to improve growth rates and subsequent yields.

Thus when the large-scale export woodchip industry arrived in Tasmania in the 1970s, Emil was keen to encourage the industry in the North-east forests. He oversaw the development of integrated harvesting operations to produce 1,000,000 tonnes of pulpwood each year from the North East Region, in addition to the existing sawlog production. Launceston was one of the focal points of public animosity toward the export woodchip industry in Tasmania, however Emil handled the situation well, continually presenting the facts and benefits it afforded the forests in improving regeneration and growth.

During his time as Regional Forester, Emil was highly respected by his staff, and throughout the industry. Emil loved his work and loved his forests. He was proud of his staff and their achievements.

Emil was a committed family man based on a strong religious belief, and extended his philosophy to his staff, with particular consideration of them during the fires season. He was an outdoor man with a love of the Tasmanian bush taking his family on many weekend and holiday

trips through the forests, camping at Greens Beach, where they later had a house, and on many bushwalks.

In 1974, after serving 27 years in the north east, Emil and family moved to the Forestry Commission's Head Office in Hobart. They settled in Lindisfarne on Hobart's eastern shore just before the Tasman Bridge was knocked down by the Lake Illawarra. His new role was Chief of the Division of Forest Operations, where he was involved primarily in budgetary matters. One of Emil's new roles was to chair the selection committee for Tasmanian Government Forestry Scholarships. As a result Emil was responsible for launching the careers of many foresters, sending two students each year off to the ANU in Canberra with a very generous scholarship to support them and a secure job when they finished.

After Emil retired in 1982 the family moved back north to Greens Beach for what he said was a very happy life of golf, gardening and looking after grandchildren. Unfortunately, Angela's health began to deteriorate before she passed away in 2001. During that year he struck up a relationship with Lois who's husband, a golf partner of Emil, had also recently passed away. Emil and Lois married in May 2002.

Emil joined the IFA in 1952, and was a Voting Member and then a Life Member. He served on the Tasmanian Division Committee from 1975 to 1977. He was a regular attendee at IFA meetings and field trips, and an energetic campaigner in promoting the cause of forestry in the public arena. He was a regular "Letters to the Editor" writer, and in more recent times, Emil was involved in tirelessly pursuing the ABC for an apology over the misinformation presented in the 4 Corners program, "Lords of the Forests" (screened 2004). In 2009 Emil was appointed as a Fellow of the IFA in recognition of his long and significant contribution to forestry and the Institute.

Life was not all seriousness for Emil though, and he was involved in a range of sports over the years, particularly golf. Emil is reputed to have had marks on the floor of his office such that, when standing on these, he could practice a full golf swing of his 5 iron, missing all the carefully arranged furniture by inches! However he was caught out one day whilst practicing, by an unexpected visit from the Chief Commissioner. On another occasion, according to reliable sources, he took out an office light fitting which then landed on his desk and brought down the ceiling as well!

Emil is survived by his wife Lois and children from his first marriage Peter, Eileen, Kerri, Tom and Cathy. He was to the end faithful as always to his God, to himself, his beliefs. His last words were "keep well and God bless".

Vale Emil Johnston.

With thanks to the Johnston family.