

Grace, Donald Edwin (based mainly on Roger Underwood (2006) "Old Growth Foresters. The lives and times of West Australian Foresters")



Student at Wesley College. Graduated from Australian Forestry School in 1951. Started with Forests Department in 1952 at Wellington Mills. Divisional Forest Officer at Collie in 1950s. In 1963 transferred to Manjimup, initially as Senior Divisional Forests Officer. Was Superintendent of Southern Region for 8 years. In 1972 appointed Superintendent in the Northern Region. Appointed Chief of Division Protection 1980. Retired in 1985, moved to Dunsborough. Died 2004.

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Don Grace - A Personal Tribute

The old "Amazing Grace", sometimes also known as "Pancho" to his mates, died the other day. He was one of WA's best known foresters from the 1950s to the 1980s, and was regarded by all as dedicated, hard working, and a good bloke.

By the time I met him (when I became DFO at Pemberton in 1968) he was already a middle-ranking officer of the Forests Department, the Superintendent of the Southern Forest Region. Don would visit and spend a day with me about once a month. Right on 8 am (at the very time when I would be preoccupied with getting the works programs for the day organised, especially during summer) he would roar into the yard in his early model Valiant, pick me up and roar off again for a day in the bush. Don liked to get full value from a day in the bush; they would rarely end before dark had well and truly set in. Finally he would drop me off at home and roar off back to Manjimup. Don drove everywhere at terrifyingly high speed, and his car had no seat belts. I remember how the dashboard in front of the passenger's seat was shiny and pitted, where many a terrorised pair of hands had gripped it, the fingernails digging in, as he rounded a blind bend on a narrow forest track at breakneck speed. I can also remember being with Don one time in the Pemberton mill bush where he was satisfying himself on the level of utilisation being achieved. It was winter and dark by 6 pm, but Don was still scrambling around the cutover bush, lighting matches to check the ends of reject logs.

Don grew up in Perth, and was a graduate of UWA and the Australian Forestry School, where his WA contemporaries were Eric Hopkins, Ed Sprengel and Jan van Noort. As a young forester, he worked on assessment, fire control and road survey and construction, the latter always being one of his great interests - Don's father was an engineer with Main Roads. In the late 1950s he was appointed DFO at Collie, a position he held for several years. Don was in charge at Collie during the 1961 bushfire crises, when all the jarrah forest districts had a huge and difficult task for several months, and he acquitted himself with distinction. In the mid-60s he was moved to Manjimup, eventually becoming the regional superintendent, and then in the early 1970s was transferred to Perth, where he became superintendent for the northern forest region, based in the old forestry office in Todd Avenue, Como. Our paths crossed again in 1980 when I took over from him in this position when Don moved into Head Office and was promoted to Chief of Division, responsible for fire protection and disease management.

Don was a hard-worker, and a tremendous details man. When you sent him a report, it would be minutely scrutinised. When a new strategy was being designed, such as the setting up of the Dieback Quarantine Areas, every minor aspect had to be tracked down and sorted out, under his personal direction and to his complete satisfaction. Don never left a stone unturned. This thoroughness could be frustrating, but it ensured things were done properly, and it counterbalanced the more sweeping style of others (like me).

I remember one incident in which I observed Don in classical form. At the time, the relationship between the Forests Department and the Metropolitan Water Supply agency was seriously strained. The problem was territorial - who was running the bush? The water supply people used to say these are our catchments, so we call the shots, while the FD used to say these are State forests, and we are responsible for their management. Most of the issues were trivial, and related to the FD's burgeoning recreation program, but it all came to a head when Don told MWS that they would need to apply to the FD for a Permit to enter Quarantine areas. The catchment management staff refused, saying no one could tell them whether or not they could enter their own catchment areas whenever they wanted to. Don called a meeting in his office at Todd Avenue and it lasted all day, with not an inch being given on either side. Night fell. No meals were served, and the supply of tea and coffee dried up. By ten at night, Don was unflagging, and he was getting on top. He simply refused to close the meeting until a decision was reached, specifically a decision in his favour. Getting on for midnight, the Water Supply people crumpled. They agreed, and were allowed to go home. It was an effective tactic, but required the sort of resilience at which few people could match Don.

An extremely convivial man, Don loved a beer with the boys on a Friday night, a sing-along at the piano (he was a good pianist), yarning at criptime in the bush, the fun of an IFA meeting or going to the football with friends and family. He was a good mimic and raconteur, had a great sense of humour and fun, and he enjoyed a good story.

None of us saw much of Don in recent years. On retirement (just after the formation of CALM in 1985) he made a decision to cut ties with forestry, or at least with CALM. He and Betty moved to Dunsborough where they had a small property, and an opportunity to keep in touch with old mates like George Peet and Doc Hammond. There they started a whole new life, and created a new range of interests and friends. He was in good health right up until the last few months.

I will remember Don Grace as a very dedicated forester, a man who devoted his career to West Australian forests. While occasionally he frustrated me with his attention to detail, I always enjoyed his company, and I benefited from his experience, support and advice when I was a young forester, as did many other young foresters of my generation.

Roger Underwood