How can one who has not served in the Commercial Division present an appreciation of its achievements? The writer, who joined the Forest Service in 1926, became associated in 1928 with A.R. Entrican and W.C. Ward in the Forest Products Branch and stayed there until retirement in 1968. It was, of course, Entrican who brought the Commercial Division into being and Ward who was its first Manager. In this short paper the names of, and contributions made by, a succession of people in the Division cannot be covered adequately, but I can testify to their achievements in a virtually unsung revolution in wood processing and use in a country notable for its high per capita wood use.

When Waipa Mill began production I operated the batch of drying kilns to help in developing schedules for stock sizes of radiata pine, but in contrast with other commercial plants, provision had been made for a small kiln with a remarkable potential for sophisticated research. This unit was matched elsewhere in the mill by other facilities provided specifically for developmental work. The latter function is an essential complement to laboratory research. The broad function of the Division's commercial timber processing units, when they began operation, was recognized essentially as practical demonstrations of how to use a new untried resource. The much larger resource of lower quality wood from the depression plantings had already been foreseen by Entrican and one or two individuals in the private sector, as foreseen by Entrican and W.C. Ward in the Forest Service, and eventually by Government, of a need to build up knowledge of how best to introduce radiata pine timber to the market before severe shortages of native species occurred. There was limited use of farmbelt radiata wood soon after World War I which showed that selected timber performed satisfactorily in houses. But to the public generally it was a container and concrete boxing wood, sometimes called "cabbage tree" or "rhubarb!"

In 1940 Waipa Mill came into being in an atmosphere hinting only mildly of the revolution to come. Objectives in setting up the Commercial Division mills and associated enterprises were enumerated below; they contrast markedly with features already mentioned as affecting the native timber industry.

1. Operation of efficient profitable units designed to deal with specific introduced conifers available for utilization at that time. At both sawmills, Waipa and Conical Hill, initial emphasis was upon radiata pine.

A demonstration of the cutting of tawa and matai at Waipa Sawmill in July 1954.
Scandinavian log gang frame saws, which were used for accurate sawing with low waste of the small, slow-grown European pine logs and also chosen for sawing radiata pine in Europe. Hence, some years earlier in South Australia, were soon found to be the most suitable in the New Zealand circumstances. The faster growth, wider range of log diameters with many of large size, along with large “spot”-type defects as well as the defective core, were features that called for changes in sawing procedure when timber grading for diverse end-uses became an established practice later.

2. Secondly, they were designed to draw on wood supplies in perpetuity from the forests in which they were located. This concept was largely unfamiliar in New Zealand and implied a wish to raise the status of sawmilling from one of crudeness and short life to one of permanence and sophistication.

3. To use the permanent sawmill and ancillary buildings to demonstrate good structural design in timber, e.g. in long-span roof trusses and splitting connectors in joints.

4. To provide modern houses, village amenities and hostel accommodation for key personnel as a logical adjunct to a permanent mill. Such buildings were used also to demonstrate potential suitability of the mills’ products to replace indigenous timbers.

5. To minimize manual handling of logs and timber, along with continuous flow through edging, docking and recovery sections, antisapstain dipping, accurate marking for grade on a roofed sorting chain, to final manual pull-off into block stack segregating sizes and grades. Mechanical handling by straddle and forklift trucks continued the flow pattern to filleting for air or kiln-drying and subsequent processing.

Insofar as those several objectives related to accepted uses for radiata pine for containers, concrete formwork and other utility functions, most of the objectives were achieved at Waipa and Conical Hill mills by the time World War II began to have its full impact. The attractively-presented timber and manufactured products were soon diverted to war needs. Objective 2 by which timber production at Waipa was to be matched to Whakarewarewa Forests’ managed yield was an early war casualty as mill production had to be doubled. Other war casualties were all indigenous timber stocks and easily accessible forest stands. It was the dearth of building timber that called for changes in sawing procedure when timber grading for diverse end-uses became an established practice later.

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As a result of the recent government changes, what is now expected of the new organizations? What steps have been implemented? Programme includes panel discussions, question times, field trips, golf, conference dinner and other social activities. It will also be a family event — so tell the family to keep these dates free.

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