

Peach Trees Gazette

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BUSHFIRE NEWS REPORTS, 1902

EDITOR'S NOTE: The bushfires which have been ravaging eastern Australia in recent weeks have caused shocking destruction and personal tragedy, and our hearts go out to all involved – families and communities coming to terms with their loss, and the emergency services endeavouring to bring the fires under control.

As we noted in the Oct Nov 2019 *Gazette*, bushfires have been a recurring feature of Australia's history, and even the present terrible season is certainly not "unprecedented" as the media like to claim. It is informative to browse the old newspapers through *Trove* (National library website).

We thought you would be interested to read this detailed description of a local bushfire in 1902 (towards the end of the long dry period known as the "Federation drought"). As you watch TV images of trucks and planes helping to fight the current fires, spare a thought for these local residents who had to do their best with minimal equipment!



Brisbane Courier, Monday 15 September 1902, page 5

(By Our Special Correspondent.)



Travellers by the North Coast mail train on Saturday who read in that morning's "Courier" of bushfires endangering Landsborough, had not reached Caboolture before the smoke-laden atmosphere denoted fires many miles further south [Note: to make sense, this should be 'north']. Patches of burning grass and timber were to be seen on either side of the line shortly after passing Beerburrum, while at Glass Mountains Station only with difficulty could the letter board be read. Both sides of the line were blazing near Beerwah, and over all was a dark mantle of smoke coming evidently from more extensive fires at the back of and beyond Landsborough.

EXTENT OF THE TROUBLE

The story told by Mr. Henry Dyer, proprietor of the Mellum Club Hotel and of the Landsborough sawmills, describes a period of extreme tension, while the fate of Landsborough hung as it were in the balance. A residence of thirteen years in the district has enabled Mr. Dyer to become acquainted with its most remote parts, so that he speaks as one possessed of the fullest local knowledge. About the beginning of September, he said, clouds of smoke drifted seaward from the Blackall Range, the nearest point about five miles west of Landsborough, and this was their first experience of the bush fires which have since spread over many parts of the district from Caboolture, in the south, to Gympie, in the north, and from Woodford to Conondale on the west side of the range to the sea coast. Occasional arrivals from the outlying parts spoke of extensive bushfires around Conondale, but nothing was said to indicate actual danger to the settlers. Last Tuesday and Wednesday the volume of smoke increased, and reports came to hand telling of fires advancing in two directions towards Landsborough, from due west, the neighbourhood of Crohamhurst, and south-west, the locale of Woodford and Conondale. The severity of the blaze in the last-named area prevented certain supplies of fat cattle being brought forward to Landsborough and even the animals kept in Mr. Dyer's paddock for local consumption could not be removed. In a small community such as Landsborough, which numbers over 300 souls, this may appear a small matter, but it sufficed to indicate to those who knew the district that the fires were spread over a very extensive area.

No apprehension of danger to the township was, however entertained, even on Thursday, when the clouds of smoke passing over the township increased in density. On Friday morning, however, fires were reported in the proximity of Simpson's, Jenner's, Holloway's, and Burgess's farms. Before noon a westerly wind, which it will be remembered blew with disagreeable force in Brisbane, sprang up, and with steadily increasing force sent the flames forward with greater

rapidity, so much so that by 1 o'clock the township was completely enveloped in smoke, and it was impossible to see from one side of the roadway to the other.

The existence of areas of rich pasture land in the North Coast district, while most parts of Southern Queensland have been rendered dry, bare, and barren, has naturally attracted very special attention, and only a few weeks ago the Police Department were rejoiced at finding paddocks specially suitable for the adjustment of departmental horses. The same richness, however, is not generally met with on the lowlands between the foot of the range and the railway. On these dried timber, withered leaves, sapless herbage, parched creeks and water channels, all tell the tale of drought. In waterless gullies vast quantities of tinder-like brushwood, swept before recent winds, had accumulated, and fallen branches and hollow trees are general features of the country. With such material to feed upon, the flames spread with rapidity, and in their fury emitted a sound, which the Landsborough folk said was like "a continuous artillery fire heard from a distance."

FIRE-FIGHTING AT LANDSBOROUGH

About 2 o'clock a heat wave set in, and with the wind still rising, particles of charred leaves and small splintered wood were carried broadcast. The air was smoke-laden, everybody's eyes smarted, and to speak without a choking sensation was well nigh impossible. Those circumstances were unmistakable indications of the approach of the fire. A general alarm was given, and there were apprehensions of personal safety. A scattered, straggling township at the best, Landsborough is not a place of recent build, but includes houses, sheds, etc, that have weathered many years. Worse still, many are roofed with shingles, and as the showers of burning leaves and sparks momentarily increased, the danger became very serious.

Everything favoured the advance of the fire, and individual effort to stem its progress could avail but little, so organisation became necessary. To this end, Mr. Dyer sent a messenger to his sawmills (situated a couple of hundred yards east of the railway station) for all hands – ten in number – to join with the townspeople in trying to beat the fire back. This brigade, about thirty-five in all, spread out along the south side of Mellum Creek and across the Blackall road. Mellum Creek, which has not known a liquid flow for some months, consists of a series of tortuous windings to the south and west of the settlement, and is spanned by a bridge on the main road about 100 yards down from the hotel. To save the bridge was a recognised duty, for with loose bolts, and loose boards splintered and riven, and hollowed by insects, a spark allowed to rest upon it would have sufficed to

ensure its destruction. There was danger also in the wild growth of lantana along the banks of the creek.

It may here be mentioned that at present Landsborough is entirely without water, the residents having to draw it from diminishing supplies two miles distant.

The breeze still brought heat, smoke, and sparks towards the township, and the fire beaters set to work not to resist the frontal advance of the fire, but to burn a belt of country three chains wide so as to arrest its progress. In this they were successful; but about this time the shingle roof of an outhouse at Stirling's was set on fire by a spark, and this intensified the situation, especially among the womenfolk, who were engaged hastily packing into metal tubs, buckets, and suchlike vessels such business papers, jewellery, and other belongings as they were most anxious to save. If the worst came to the worst, and their homes and furniture must fall to the flames, they clung to the hope that these might still be saved if placed in the centre of the roadway. What heart pangs were experienced in packing these rude vessels may be readily imagined.

The beaters held to the task until about sundown, when First-class Constable Beecher – an officer of tact and resource, who has shown commendable vigilance throughout these trying days, advised the authorities in Brisbane of the gravity of the situation.

About this time the wind moderated, and seemed to gradually die away. For the nonce a sense of happy relief fell upon the small community, but the sudden approach of a broad wall of flame from the west, sending forth blasts of heat like a furnace, almost stupefied everyone. The thermometer in the open half-a-mile from the fire registered 93deg., and was still rising when the wind died away. This revived hope that the worst was past, but as there was no knowing how soon another breeze might spring up, it was decided by the townspeople to organise a patrol to note the progress of the fire during the night. This was done, but no one cared to go to bed, and at the hotel and other places bells were left convenient under the verandas, so that alarm could be given on the shortest notice.

POLICE ASSISTANCE

Fortunately the Acting Commissioner of Police, Chief Inspector Douglas, had read between the lines of the telegraphic advice he had received from the officer at Landsborough, and, scenting possible danger, despatched Sub-Inspector Sweetman and five men by the mail train on Friday night. They picked up two additional constables at Caboolture, and their arrival at Landsborough soon after

midnight imparted a greater sense of security to the townspeople, who felt grateful that they were not left to fight the fire-fiend single handed.

Sub-Inspector Sweetman, an able officer, with more than twenty years' experience in the Queensland Police, soon made himself master of the situation, and with promptitude despatched mounted men to patrol the country through which the fire had swept, to learn the condition of the settlers and to report immediately where assistance was required. Other men patrolled the advance line of the fire, and took steps to prevent further approach towards the little settlement. Happily, there was no change in the wind during the night, and the police patrol returned about 8 o'clock the following morning, and reported that miles upon miles of the country had been burnt – in fact, all ground herbage had disappeared, and few fences had escaped either fire or destruction by fallen timber. The settlers near the Gympie Road and on Coochin Creek were safe, though they informed the constable that they had had "a great battle with the fire." The patrol further reported that all along the road to the Blackall Range had been ablaze, but no damage was known to have been done. The farmers Simpson, Jenner, Holloway, and Burgess had been called upon, but had reported no loss.

Patrols were maintained throughout Saturday. Their report, however, continued of a reassuring nature, and Sub-Inspector Sweetman, considering that all danger was past, returned with his men to Brisbane, which was reached about midnight.

DESTRUCTION OF CAMP

While no actual loss has been reported among the townspeople or farmers, a camp of five men, police recruits, camped near the reserve, and engaged getting slabs for the police paddocks, were burnt out on Thursday, losing everything except what they wore. These men had received their wages the previous day, and on Thursday morning were working about three-quarters of a mile from their tents when the fire, driven by a changing wind, swept down and consumed everything. One man lost £15, another £10, and each lost a silver watch, civilian's clothing, and uniform. They estimate their loss at £120. A quantity of horse feed they had with them was also burned and some harness entirely destroyed.

THE ORIGIN OF THE FIRE

So far as the police and townspeople have been able to learn, the fire originated near Mount Beerwah (nine miles from Landsborough), and, driven by the wind, spread in various directions, crossing Mellum Mountain, then burning across Peachester, and via the Razorback, converging on Landsborough.





Henry

Dyer's sawmill, Landsborough, c 1900 (photograph from Picture Sunshine Coast). Some of the men pictured here may have been part of the makeshift "brigade" which helped to save the town.



An interesting news item published the following day in – would you believe, the Broken Hill paper – reveals that this bushfire was still on the move.

Barrier Miner (Broken Hill), Tuesday 16 Sept 1902

BUSHFIRES IN QUEENSLAND

Flames Still Spreading

[BY TELEGRAPH] BRISBANE, Tuesday.

Bush fires have swept over a large portion of Pimpama Island, and heavy losses of property have occurred. Two hundred tons of firewood were destroyed, and 10 sugar farms were swept bare. The fire from Landsborough, fanned into another blaze by a fresh wind, has reached Woombye, and is still burning fiercely. The settlers yesterday turned out to save the Dulong provisional school.

All round Nambour also appears to be a mass of fire, even the green scrub burning.

A strong westerly was experienced in Brisbane yesterday, and thick clouds of smoke were observable to the west, caused by the fires in the Enoggera Ranges. Fires were also noticeable in other directions.

A POET'S VIEW

Several members sent these lines by Henry Lawson (1867-1922), as a suggestion for the *Gazette*. Part of a longer poem "The Fire at Ross's Farm" (1890), this excerpt captures brilliantly in words the frightening images we now see on TV.

*One Christmas-time, when months of drought
Had parched the western creeks,
The bush-fires started in the north
And travelled south for weeks.*

*At night, along the river side,
The scene was grand and strange;
The hill-fires looked like lighted streets
Of cities in the range.*

*Tho cattle tracks between the trees
Were like long, dusty aisles.
And, on a sudden breeze, the fire
Would sweep along for miles.*

*Like sounds of distant musketry
It crackled through the brakes,
And o'er the flat of silvery grass
It hissed like angry snakes.*

*It leapt across the flowing streams,
And raced o'er pastures broad.
It climbed the trees and lit the boughs,
And through the scrub it roared.*

*The bees fell stifled in tho smoke
Or perished in their hives,
And, with the stock, the kangaroos
Went flying for their lives.*

“DO NOT FORGET AUSTRALIA”



Sir John Monash Centre, France

The nearby town of Villers-Bretonneux has shown their support for Australians affected by the bushfires, echoing the support Australian forces provided more than 100 years ago, when ANZAC forces freed them from German occupation.

To this day, “Do not forget Australia” is prominently displayed in signs around its school and playgrounds, and now, in human form, at the Australian National Memorial.

The Franco-Australian association recently launched an appeal to support those impacted by the fires, and has plans for a local fundraising march in the near future.

(Sir John Monash Centre Facebook page, 10 January 2020)

Helen Page, Peacheater History Committee Newsletter.