MHS Roundabout
Monbulk Historical Society Newsletter
No. 31 Summer 2022

WHEN A BUSHFIRE SWEPT THROUGH MONBULK

On the 5th February 1913 the Monbulk settlement experienced a devastating bushfire. The State School, Mechanics' Institute, about 20 houses, and some bridges were reduced to smoking ruins. Most of the people at Monbulk were small settlers, who depended mainly on the growing of soft fruits for a living.

The newspapers of the time explained the hardships experienced and how they came together to rebuild their close community.

HOMES AND SCHOOLS DESTROYED. SETTLER'S WIFE IN DANGER.

Tuesday will be known in the annals of Monbulk village settlement as Black Tuesday (says the Melbourne "Argus"), as within the space of a few hours this region was scorched and blasted from end to end. The fires were at their height at 4 o'clock. The first residence to catch was Dr. McColl's, but in a short space the houses of the following were completely destroyed: D. Hill's, W. Nolan's. Mrs. Stanton's, Gagg's. T. Gay's, Ward's, J. Foster's, F. Stewart's (two), Curry's, McKellar's. James's, Coombe's, Blair's, and White's. The properties of Messrs. McCarthy and Prior were partly destroyed. Mr. Nugent, president of the Ferntree Gully Shire, lost fencing and two outbuildings.

Monbulk State School after the fire 1913

At 4 o'clock, while most of the residents were fighting to save their dwellings, the fire swept around Mr. Roberts' residence, and the Mechanics' Institute caught fire. In a short time it was a smouldering ruin, and every moment it looked as if Nation's store, which was opposite, would be ignited, but with plentiful supply of water the fire-fighters saved it. For 15 years the settlers have been working to liquidate the debt on the Mechanics' Institute, and since that was accomplished a piano was bought. The building was insured for £350, but its loss was a great blow to the district. The State Savings Bank's quarters were in a room at the rear and in removing the safe, Mr. Kay had the misfortune to have his finger crushed. The seven-roomed residence of the State School teacher, Mr. Gregory, adjoined the Mechanics' Institute, and this was destroyed with the State School, properties worth over £1,000, which will be a total loss, as the department does not insure its buildings. The head teacher, Mr. Gregory, was absent in Melbourne attending drill.

The settlement is in a valley, and, as the fire started from South Wandin, it was driven by the fierce north wind right through to "the patch." The areas are divided into 10-acre blocks, and an aged couple named Gagg, who lived on one of these, had a tragic experience. Their land is in the heart of the valley. At about 3 o'clock their house caught fire, and, seeing that it was impossible to save it, Mr. Gagg, leaving his wife behind, released the two horses, and rushed off to the township, half a mile away, to secure help to take the drays, &c, out of the out buildings. During his absence the fire swept behind him, and for three hours it was impossible for him to get back to his home. His terrified wife thought that he had been caught in the flames. She was horrified to see the flames leaping towards the dense raspberry plantation, in which the two horses had trotted for shelter. In a few minutes, she saw them roasted to death, and the fire swept towards the outbuildings and demolished them in a few minutes. Almost distracted with fear she reached a cleared spot, and was not re-joined by her husband until three hours later. Yesterday the husband and wife tramped the six miles to the Belgrave station, with all their belongings tied in a handkerchief. No mail could leave the township while the fire raged. Mr. Wilson,

one of the coach-drivers, left with a load of passengers at a quarter past 6 pm as his house is on the extreme south of the valley, and the road was open to Belgrave. The fire was sweeping towards his house, and he left his housekeeper, who was hastily preparing to depart, and, telling her to let the horses on to the road if the fire got too near, he drove away. The residence of the forest ranger, Mr. O'Donohue, is on a lofty elevation, overlooking "the patch," where most of the houses were burnt, and he said that at 9 o'clock the whole of the valley appeared to be a mass of flames.

Monbulk State School in ruins after 1913 bushfire

The graded road runs past his property, and on it were countless birds, seeking shelter from the fires on either side. The two roads leading to the township were both blocked with fallen logs. At 9 p.m. the fire was making in the direction of South Sassafras, when it was checked by a change of wind. Settlers were kept in fear until midnight, when the rain came, and the danger was past. The disaster which has fallen upon the settlement has left its mark, as most of those interviewed bore traces of the severe struggle through which they had passed.

It is hoped that some assistance will be speedily given, as scores of people are homeless, and many have lost stock upon which they depended for a living.

The Advertiser Wednesday 5 February 1913

BUSH FIRE AT MONBULK.

When we went to press last week everything was uncertain, roads were blocked, and the full details of the disaster were impossible, but we are now more sure of our ground, and it will be within the mark when we state that £1500 will be needed to place losers in a reasonable degree of comfort ignoring the destruction of public buildings, which will cost another £1500, to replace, and much fencing and minor losses. The relief committees formed to assess and relieve the distress will have plenty to do but the committees comprise a number who know their book, some of which have already passed through a similar trying ordeal. The Sassafras committee, with Cr. A. G. Plowman, Messrs J. T. Bird and H. G. Swift at the head, have been asked to join the local committee formed at Monbulk on Tuesday night when Crs. Rouget and Wallace attended a meeting in the Monbulk Methodist church. It was thought that the scene of the disaster should be the centre. The committee then elected comprised Ex-Cr. Gilmour (chairman), Messrs W. C. Gregory, head teacher S.S. (treasurer), P. Simpson, H. Dennis, W. Bowman, J. O'Donoghue and R. Leek, with Mesdames Simpson, Nation, Roberts, Bradshaw and Warner to look after such items as only ladies can. Cr. McAlpin, president of the Lilydale shire, visited the district on Wednesday afternoon, and upon his shoulders is the responsibility of arranging for a deputation to the minister of public works (Mr Edgar), consisting of members of Ferntree Gully and Lilydale councils and the relief committee, so that they may place before him full particulars of the estimated losses with a view to government relief. Much of the loss carries with it no dramatic effect and may not appeal to sentiment, but the loss is none the less real, and will be very real, for the next two or three years. To see a man's home licked up by walls of fire appeals to the imagination, but when these walls of fire pass over an orchard and bake the fruit on the trees and leave them but shrivelled vegetation is but a matter of moments; but next year when the poor depleted settler goes along with his empty raspberry bucket or fruit case to find like the men of old who came to the barren fig tree, that will be the time when it will hurt. One, and even a family may live, with a reasonable degree of comfort in clean roomy tents for 6 months or longer without the novelty wearing off, but it will take many six months for a new fruit tree to be in full bearing and so help a man to pay his butcher, baker and storekeeper.

We have been over pretty well every chain of the affected area, and there is much damage, some of which cannot be assessed at its true value, but we hope that the ever generous public will promptly come along, even with ever so little each, and give the sufferers help so that they may be ready to make a fresh start to meet the long winter of the mountains. When the weather and roads are bad a little home comfort after a day's hard work (and there is plenty of it before them) does much to spur on a man to continued effort. There is plenty of backbone left in the district. Even among the little people. One case we saw a little chap, who said he was 17 and looked about 12, away on his own the morning after the fire trying to mend his father's damaged fences so that the balance of their crop might be saved from any stock wandering. Those who can afford to help should do so at once. He who gives quickly gives double. Just immediate needs have been dealt with by order of Mr Edgar on behalf of the department.

G. A. LOVELL.

Box Hill Reporter Friday 14 Feb 1913

LENY BROEKHOF CELEBRATES 100 YEARS

Leny and her husband, Nick, arrived in Australia on 26th October 1959 with their four oldest children Trudy, Bill, Cees and Jenny. Their fifth child, Shirlene, was born in Australia.

They came to Monbulk because an old school friend from Holland, Henk van Berkel, had a job available for Nick. Henk picked them up from Port Melbourne and drove them to their house on McCarthy Road. It was an old house and there was no electricity or plumbing. A bit of a shock when you come from a house with all the 'mod cons'. This house was where John Mitchell and his siblings had lived when growing up. Previous to the Broekhofs moving in it had been used as van Berkel's bulb packing shed. They settled in and it wasn't long before their neighbour, Mrs Williams from the Church of Christ Camp was there to welcome them with cakes and scones.

When their shipping container arrived with their furniture it felt like home.

The Broekhof home was burned to the ground in the 1962 bushfire that came down the hill behind the Silvan Dam. The Church of Christ Camp and other homes in the area were also destroyed. The Broekhof family were able to move into the two roomed house belonging to the Broersen family for a couple of months and then they moved into a home in Moores Road. By late 1962 they shifted into their fourth home since arriving in Australia. This is where they started their family bulb business in Silvan Road.

Leny working in the family business doing everything from picking dahlias, propagating cuttings, packing orders, and the book keeping. As the business grew she dealt with the administrative side more, even learning computer data entry in her late 70s. She retired at 85 when the mail order side of the business was sold.

Leny 1962

During the 1983 Ash Wednesday bushfires Dawn Fleming contacted Leny to ask her to collect clothing for the people who were stranded in Cockatoo. She became a member of MFB Ladies' Auxiliary after that.

Leny was always on a committee! She served on the kindergarten committee for many years, and was there when they raised the money to build the new kinder on Moores Road. She was on the primary school's Mothers' Club and Parent/Teacher Committees for many years, as well being part of a small group that started the school's after school activities. She also served on Monbulk High School's Parent/Teacher Council for a few years.

She was on the Sylvan Glades committee where she and Judy James were the members that dealt directly with the residents and attended to many of their needs. Although not a member, Leny was awarded a life membership of the Monbulk Senior Citizens for driving and picking up many of the members for the weekly club meetings, some younger than herself.

The Monbulk Rotary Club awarded Leny a Vocational Service Award in the 1980s for community service.

Leny became a member of the Belgrave VIEW Club in 1994 and held various committee positions over the years. She still attends the monthly meetings.

She did all that while keeping house and raising a family, and then looking after grandchildren including driving them to school everyday.

The following story is how Leny remembered the 1962 bushfire that destroyed their first home. Leny and her family certainly did not have it easy. Keep in mind the obvious primitive conditions where they were living with four young children and very limited command of the English language at the time.

"We liked it in the bush and settled in very quickly till one day in January 1962 when there was very hot northerly wind. In the morning we could see smoke but we thought nothing of it as we had no experience with bushfire. We had no radio so we were not alerted.

The smoke got thicker and our neighbour John Mitchell told us it could be serious. Then late afternoon/early evening the fire brigade arrived and told us to evacuate before it was too late. They told us to take some blankets as we might have to be away overnight. We loaded everyone into the panel van and drove to Van Berkels on Silvan Road".

It was frightening, as the fire was at the fence of the Silvan Reservoir and with the strong wind blowing hot ash across McCarthy Road into the private properties, spot fires were starting well in advance of the main fire front in places like Moores Road and many other areas.

Come nightfall we decided to bed all the kids down in the lounge room. There were quite a few as the two brothers Henk and Len Van Berkel, had twenty-one between them, plus our four. Just when we were all settled and us women were having a cup of coffee, one of the men came in and said we had to leave, as the fires were coming over the hill fast and it was too dangerous to stay.

We were sent to the van Graas's farm on Old Emerald Road, it was very scary. Fires were burning everywhere and the men were walking around with knapsacks to try to put them out, when we arrived there were already a large amount of cars and people. It was organised chaos, people were crying and others were praying, we tried to keep the children calm with some stories.

In the panic of moving to the van Graas's property I was separated from Nick and the two boys. Nick finally found me at van Graas's and I asked 'Where are the boys?' 'Aren't they with you', he said. 'When it got too dangerous we sent all the kids up to van Graas's with one of the men'. Panic!

The boys had indeed travelled in another vehicle from the Van Berkel's, but they were blocked by the fire and ended up at the Emerald Hall for the next few hours. We had a worrying time until we found out what had happened.

Around midnight or a bit later it started to rain.

Finally we were allowed to leave; we went back to the Van Berkel's as the fires were still burning in the McCarthy Road area. We were all exhausted and went to bed. Just when I dozed off to sleep, someone was shaking me, it was Nick, he said that he had been up to the house and it was burned to the ground, he said. 'Wake up, we lost everything, now you can go back to sleep…'

Nick and Leny's home after 1962 bushfire

The next morning we went to the house and sifted through the ashes to see if we could salvage anything, no luck. We weren't the only ones who lost everything. The Church of Christ Camp and the Wilson's house opposite also were burned down. The people of Monbulk were marvellous in offering help, but the aftermath of a bushfire in which you lose everything, lasts a long time.

Information taken from 'Go To Blazes' by Geoff Sands 2005

On the behalf of the community of Monbulk we would like to say thank you Leny for all your hard work over the years. Monbulk is so lucky to have you as part of our community.

Anyone wishing to offer congratulations to Leny on reaching this wonderful milestone is welcome to join her for a 'cuppa' at the Monbulk RSL between 1pm and 3.30pm on 21st December.