

# Bushfires at Riverstone.

*Shirley Seale*

As we look around our area today, with many new houses in the township and land development surging forward around us, it is easy to forget, or never to have known, that once the people of Riverstone, Schofields and Vineyard lived in fear of bushfires. Surrounded by bush, with remnants of the Cumberland State Forest on all sides, our pioneer settlers faced this threat many times and saw their houses and those of friends and neighbours burned to the ground.

Today, when we see the summer fires raging in communities, we know that there are trained fire fighters, modern trucks and even water carrying helicopters and planes ready to douse the flames. When even these fail to stop a fire in full force, how much more frightening to be fighting the fires near your home with only a wet hessian bag, no town water supply and the help of willing friends. The older residents of Riverstone bravely faced the danger and lived to tell about it.

The pages of the *Windsor and Richmond Gazette* record some of the details. The earliest I found was in January 1900 after Sunday 3rd and Monday 4th had been days of extreme heat. In fact on Monday 4th January 1900, the temperature record had been broken when the Fahrenheit thermometer reached 119.9 degrees, (approximately 48 degrees Celsius.) Several properties on Blacktown Road near South Creek were alight and Mr Young's bush burnt furiously. Timber, glass and fencing were destroyed. The fire extended to Riverstone Meatworks "Jericho" estate, once the property of the Rouse family of Rouse Hill House. For two days the whole district was enveloped in smoke and hot winds blew, carrying the smell of fire with them.

On October 16th 1936 a fire started at the railway line at Mulgrave and burnt over 1000 acres. Groves Tea Gardens were only just saved.

In January, 1939, we were experiencing a heatwave. On 4th January, Riverstone Fire Brigade made an urgent call to Vineyard when fire threatened a number of houses. A large area of bush burned.

On the thirteenth of that month, the temperature rose to 122 degrees Fahrenheit, close to 50 degrees Celsius, the highest ever recorded in the district. Poultry farmers were worst hit with many birds dying. Workers at the Riverstone Meatworks had to be sent home because they could not work in the heat. The whole area was so dry after many days of intense heat that sporadic fires broke out, but it was on Saturday, 14th that tragedy struck. According to the report in the *Gazette*, "many unfortunate settlers.....saw all of their cherished belongings swept away in the path of ravening (sic) bush fires which, fanned by a strong breeze and aided by tinder dry vegetation as a result of a week of record heat, roared over properties in an overwhelming wall of flame which left blackened ruin and desolation in its wake".

The *Gazette* records that the most disastrous of the fires originated near Mr Gross' property at Bandon Road in Vineyard, and spread with ferocious speed through Box Hill and Rouse Hill districts leaving behind desolation and ruin. The fire went from Gross' to Stacey's then Whyt's and Schoffel's where it completely destroyed their home. It then passed on through the whole of Box Hill and continued on to Castle Hill, destroying many homes on the way.



1939. The ruins of the Schoffel family home.

Photo: Schoffel family

Another arm of the fire went North East, jumping Boundary Road into Andrew's and then continuing into the Nelson district where more homes were lost. It burned through well known identities, Hession's and Mason's properties, before it was finally extinguished in the Castle Hill/Kenthurst vicinity. However a strong southerly sprang up during the night and it flared up again near Rouse Hill, where homes were in danger until it was finally contained.

After the fire had passed, the remains of two men, Messrs Davis and Metcalfe, were found near a shack they were occupying in the Box Hill Estate near Nelson Road. They had returned from a trip to Moree and it is thought they were asleep or died attempting to start their truck to escape the flames.

Thousands of fowls were incinerated in the fire and no property in Box Hill escaped damage. Men and women fought the fire side by side and escaped death by luck in many instances.

Another fire that started near the Railway line at Mulgrave spread into Schofield's property, then into Cunneen's, Morley's, Cotterell's and Hanahan's. It then spread through the outskirts of Riverstone, destroying fences, sheds and outhouses. It totally destroyed the homes of Messers Clout and Freeman in the Riverstone bush. Many of the residents in the vicinity were ordered to evacuate by the police.

Considerable damage was caused by a fire that started at the back of Vineyard School, and burned through the Riverstone bush for some distance before it was stopped at Garfield Road, near Mr Andrew's property. It menaced the homes of the Swift, Burden, Hanahan, Newton and Mason families, with all the residents losing many fowls.

The fourth outbreak of the day travelled through Windsor Common on to the land owned by the Riverstone Meat Company, where it destroyed the house and outbuildings of Mr Horrex, the family only just escaping with their lives.

The first call to the fires came at 11 am and Windsor Fire Brigade attended. As the threat became more widespread, Riverstone Brigade was also in the thick of the fight. Even the Mayor, Alderman J. McLeod, and other council members rolled up their sleeves and worked side by side with the locals.

So many people were left destitute that the paper thought Government help would be necessary to help them. As is often the case, ironically, the Sunday and Monday after the fire were cool and rainy.

The worst fire to hit the district, though, arrived in the midst of another conflagration, World War 2. It was December, and was “one of the most tragic and calamitous days in Hawkesbury history”.(*Windsor and Richmond Gazette*,13.12.44). As early as 9.30 am the fire was so bad at Kurrajong, that Miss B. Pittman was badly burned as she rushed into her home to save valuables. Sadly she died later that night. By 12.30 pm the whole of North Richmond was threatened. The gales reached 75 miles per hour, (120 kms), and pushed the flames through all obstacles.

About midday a fire started at Clarendon. Eventually the fire came down Blacktown Road and burned out No 4 Dairy owned by Mr Jones. It then jumped South Creek and destroyed all outhouses and a new car and 60 tons of hay at Mr Christey’s. He was dragged out from the shed with the car just as it caught fire.

On the southern side of Blacktown Road it burned out “Berkshire Park”, a large home originally built by Richard Rouse of Rouse Hill House for his daughter, Mrs Jonathon Hassall in the early 1800s, but at that time owned by Mr Edmunds. At the rear of “Clydesdale”, 80 head of cattle were crazed with fear and tried to race ahead of the flames, some crashed through the fence, but others were caught on the wire and the road was littered with burnt carcasses. The fire then burned across the Riverstone Meatworks’ paddocks towards Riverstone. At least 20 houses were in danger of destruction, but a squad of volunteers managed to save them.

Mr J W Ryan’s six roomed weatherboard cottage and contents were completely destroyed. Mr Phillips, who also occupied the house with his wife and two children, lost 35 pounds in notes.

Houses occupied by Mrs Woodlands (Walker St], Mr R W Armstrong (Lamb St) and Mrs Onslow (Ben St) were totally destroyed. When an outhouse at Mr Tom Griffin’s property caught alight both he and his wife were badly burned in making a successful effort to save the house. The flames jumped Carnarvon Road and burnt fiercely in the direction of Schofields where properties owned by the Buss and Dawson families narrowly escaped.

By an almost superhuman effort Mr Dawson managed to save his property which he had only recently acquired. The flames were actually licking the verandah posts. Mr Dawson was burnt about the hands, feet and face.

A squad of volunteers led by Constable Baker made a good save at Jim Higgins’ house where the flames had swept underneath. Mr Voysey raced into the laundry and carried out a heap of blazing material.

In 2003, I spoke with Ron Shields about his memories of the fire. He was 10 years old at the time of the fire and staying at his grandparents’ house at 180 Garfield Road, Marsden Park. His grandfather was lying down on the verandah, when he smelled smoke. The fire came from Windsor Downs and burned through to Schofields. There was no mains water supply, but they had a dam and a well, so they filled a 44 gallon drum and went around the property with it on a billy cart, as well as using buckets of water to put out spot fires. He recalled that the wind stirred by the fire was like a tornado. He was very scared, and his grandfather let him have a sip of brandy to keep him going.

They had two acres at the back of the property which was planted with green corn and Jim Craven’s family and Bob Tate and his wife and baby hid in there, lying on the ground between the rows and

were safe, as the green corn did not burn. He said no photographs were taken as they were all too busy fighting the fires and saving what property they could.

He recalled, when speaking to Clarrie Neal, that his mother doused their fowls with water to revive them and that other families were sitting in the middle of Garfield Road with their possessions. The families who lost their homes to the bushfire that day, he said, were the Ryans, Woodlands, Armstrongs and Chathams.

With the arrival of 100 servicemen at 8.30 pm the fire was gradually brought under control. Under the direction of Bob Clifford the servicemen burnt a large tract of Bliss' Bush as a firebreak. Constable Baker and the volunteers narrowly escaped when a lorry taking them to Jones' Dairy caught fire. Both sides of the road were alight and Jock Simpson, owner and driver of the lorry, was desperately trying to break through the smoke and flames when Tom Robbins leapt to the road and shouted that the lorry was on fire. The seat with the petrol tank underneath it was on fire. It was ripped out and extinguished with the contents of the water bag.

Mulgrave was the seat of another fire which raced towards Vineyard. The wind carried it across the railway line just to the west of Mr West's home which was encircled by flames, but survived.

Fire raced towards the heavily grassed land of Mr Brown. The Brown girls showed great courage and succeeded in stopping it from spreading to heavily timbered and grassed lands. The fire spread towards Bandon Rd and straight for Vineyard village which includes the Rivoli Hall, Rannard's Store, the Public School, Church Hall and many homes.



Buildings in the "Vineyard Village" The shop on the right was at one stage Rannard's store.

Photo: Shirley Henry Collection.

It looked as if they would all go – but Mr Harry Budd arrived with a tanker of water to assist the local teacher and his wife who tackled the racing flames and stopped them from reaching the area. The church hall was seriously threatened until the Riverstone Fire Brigade arrived.

The Vineyard Bush Brigade of which Harry Budd was President arrived with Jack Kell, T. Asher, Jim Wilkinson, Dun Mann and son, Private Phipps and Mr Howitt and with great effort stopped the fire

just yards from the school and residence, Rivoli Hall and store. Cinders set fire to a palm tree in front of the store and burnt holes in the mosquito nets on the beds on the verandah of the residence.

Fire raced across part of Bandon Road, through the school playground, putting the homes of Messers McLean and Alcorn in danger and burning fowls in their pens near these houses. The fire went across Windsor Road and spread towards Box Hill. Towards nightfall, Vineyard Bush fire Brigade spent time extinguishing stumps and burning fences to ensure safety.

During the early stages Sgt Newell of Windsor Police, and the Windsor Fire Brigade, which had been early on the scene, left for Marsden Park, where a serious outbreak had occurred, leaving Vineyard Brigade to take charge.

On Monday fires were still burning. The eastern portion of the State Forest on Blacktown Road caught fire. Flames jumped the road and South Windsor was threatened.

On Tuesday Mr Frank Finnan MLA, accompanied by officers of the Department of Labour and Industry and Social Services visited the burnt out areas in the district and assisted in supplying the homeless with food, clothing, bedding and money. As it was wartime, he hoped to have present at a public meeting, members of relevant Government Departments to release barbed wire, fodder, fencing posts and building materials, which were in short supply and taken for war use. He arranged to increase the petrol rations to cover the extra that had been needed to carry water.

A public meeting was held at Riverstone on Monday, 18th December 1944 and a committee was appointed comprising townspeople and employees from the Riverstone Meat Company to raise and distribute funds to those devastated by the fires. Business people in town were asked to display subscription lists and Meatworks' employees levied themselves from their wages.

Another fire started on Wednesday, 27th December at 11pm and swept through Vineyard, before it was turned towards Pitt Town by a southerly "buster". It was thought to have started from sparks from a train, which were all steam powered in this area at that time, at the rear of Mr Schofield's property, which was the first in danger. Firefighters saved the house, but poultry sheds, cow bails and fencing were destroyed. The fire continued to burn through Oakville in following days.

The Prime Minister, Mr Chifley, who had apologized for not being able to come earlier, visited the district on 28th December and was at Riverstone Post Office at 10.30 am.

1944 had been a drought year, with a record low rainfall of only 1230 points. But on 10th January 1945, five inches, (12 ½ cms) of rain fell.

In the summers now, as we sit in our air-conditioned homes, or swim in our pools and complain about the heat wave, spare a thought for the early residents of our town, who battled so bravely, endured such losses but rallied to help each other through the disasters to make the Riverstone area the community it is.