

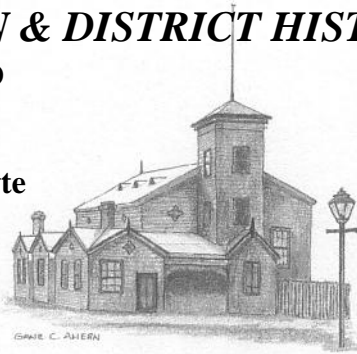
YARRA GLEN & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY Inc.

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NEWSLETTER

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President's Column

We are very fortunate to have the help of our new member Helen Mann as Editor of our Newsletter. With Eric's support she has compiled her first bulletin, which I am sure you will find most interesting. I already look forward to the second edition in a few months time.

Thank you Helen for your commitment.

Brenda Cawte

Forthcoming events to note

12 August (Thurs) 7:30pm

"Grandma's drawers: what went under the crinoline? A fascinating talk and display of Victorian underwear."

Australian Institute of Genealogical Studies (AIGS) Library, 1/41 Railway Rd, Blackburn

Bookings essential 9877 3789

\$7 includes coffee/tea & biscuits.

4 September (Sat) 2:00pm

"A parade of Cup fashions from the 1880s"

Whitehorse Historical Society Inc

Forster Hall, Christ Church Anglican Church, Edward Street, Mitcham.

Donation \$10. Delicious afternoon tea and door prizes.

9 September (Thurs) 7:30pm

Illustrated and entertaining stories about finding 'lost' ancestors and tips on where to look for them.

AIGS Library, 1/41 Railway Rd, Blackburn

\$7 Bookings essential 9877 3789

The 1939 Bushfires

The Society has been given permission to print a letter which is a first hand account of the 1939 bushfires in the Yarra Glen district

The author of the letter was Ronald Alcon Dredge, a young man living in the city who responded to the call for volunteers to fight the fires which devastated the State of Victoria in January 1939. Dredge had been born on 7 March 1917 in Coburg and was therefore 21 years old at the time. In 1940 he volunteered again, this time to enlist in the Army on 8 May 1940. He was discharged in October 1946 having reached the rank of Captain in the 2/14 Australian Infantry Battalion. Ronald Dredge died on 8 September 1982.

The 1939 fires were the worst that Victoria had known since the Port Phillip colony was settled. Judge Leonard Stretton described the situation in his report for the Royal Commission:

"... the month of January of the year 1939 came towards the end of a long drought which had been aggravated by a severe hot, dry summer season. For more than twenty years the State of Victoria had not seen its countryside and forests in such travail. Creeks and springs ceased to run.

Water storages were depleted. Provincial towns were facing the probability of cessation of water supply. In Melbourne, more than a million inhabitants were subjected to restrictions upon the use of water. Throughout the countryside, the farmers were carting water, if such was available, for their stock and themselves ...

Seventy-one lives were lost. Sixty-nine mills were burned. Millions of acres of fine forest, of almost incalculable value, were destroyed or badly damaged. Townships were obliterated in a few minutes. Mills, houses, bridges, tramways, machinery, were burned to the ground; men, cattle, horses, sheep, were devoured by the fires or asphyxiated by the scorching debilitated air.

Generally, the numerous fires which during December, in many parts of Victoria, had been burning separately, as they do in any summer, either 'under control' as it is falsely and dangerously called, or entirely untended, reached the climax of their intensity and joined forces in a devastating confluence of flame on Friday, the 13th of January."

The fire that reached Yarra Glen is believed to have started at Queenstown. Driven by a northwesterly gale it swept over Christmas Hills, down across the southern boundaries of the town, and beyond the railway viaduct to Yering.

The *Lilydale Express* listed the following properties destroyed : Dr. Pigdon's residence and out-buildings ['Blaaven'], Mr D.J.Davey's house, Mr Gilbert Bell's 'Redcourt', Mr William Roth's 'Kincraig', Miss French's, Mr Howey's, Mr Edward's, Mr Sydmour's (sic) [Seymour's 'Banool'], Mr W. Rentol's, Mr R.W. Scott's.

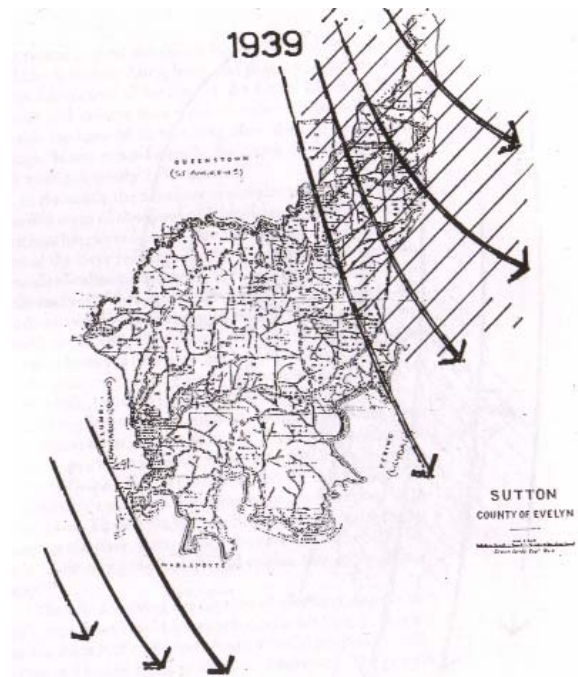
Other homes burnt included 'Inshallah', and 'Tanana' on the escarpment; Mr W. Sadlier's, Mr W. (Billy) Hall's at the foot of the Hills; : the properties of Captain Dickens and Mr B Parkinson of Steel's Creek, and the homes of Mrs Booth, Messrs, Gordon, Smedley, Beck and Barry in Dixon's Creek.

References:

http://www.abc.net.au/blackfriday/story/story_html.htm

Lilydale Express, January 20, 1939

Woiwod, Mick. *Once around the Sugarloaf*, 1992



Source: Mick Woiwod, *Once around the Sugarloaf*, p.127

*Abbotsford,
Monday. [16 January 1939]*

Dear Dad,

We certainly have hot weather when it is hot! Our 114 degrees on Friday was a trimmer.

I joined the Power House unit on Wednesday and was agreeably surprised to find myself with such beginners as Ken Beiri, Noel Thomas (M.C.C. baseballer) and several other decent young chaps.

I am going to get straight on with my weekend which will I think take up a good deal of time and paper, and I am too full of it to think of much else.

Came straight home from work on Friday, changed and hopped back to the Treasury buildings where volunteers were being enlisted for fire fighting. I left at 7.30 in a truck for Warrandyte. There were about 20 of us. There was nothing to do at Warrandyte, the fire having jumped the river and made off towards Wonga Park and Kangaroo Flats. We went on and worked on several fires, attempting to burn breaks to stop or divert it. We broke round two houses and, persuasion futile, dragged an old chap of 70 odd out of another. In the retreat

back to the trucks we saw it burn and heard the poor old chap's anguished cursing and moaning. Very eerie and awe-inspiring, fighting in the dark. All sound but the crackling of the fire is dulled. Yells from companions sound far away, and two, three or four chaps working alone feel dreadfully lonely. When the old chap's home burned, the fire spread on around the hill and we were threatened if we did not get back on the road. So, there being no more houses or people in the fire's path we hurried back to Warrandyte. Just before entering Warrandyte, we pulled up suddenly. There lying on the side of the road were four chaps out to it on the ground. They were all sound asleep and looked quite dead. From their positions we gathered that they had got out of the truck nearby and dropped asleep where they stood then fell to the ground. No pillows, no covering, they were sleeping the sleep of the exhausted and richly they must have earned their rest.

Had a very refreshing swim in the river in the nude. Then back, had some refreshments and came back to town. Gathered around the refreshment and first-aid hall were about eight families of destitute women and children. Weaving one's way through them, one heard their heart-broken sobs as they bemoaned their loss!

Got back to town at 2.45 or thereabouts and after more refreshments left for Queenstown at between 3.30 and 4.00. Of the 20 men on our truck before only eight of us were taken on the next trip, we eight being picked by name evidently for our worth. I'm not bragging but we were pointed out by a forester who had been up with us. Collected 22 five gallon milk cans, on the two Myer vans, from the Red Cross office and filled them on the way up. The water was for the townspeople up there who were almost completely out of water. Went about 2 miles out of Queenstown for about 1½ hours. Back to Q. for breakfast then off to Yarra Glen via the Christmas Hills.

Practically all the country between had been burned and all scenic beauty is destroyed. There was a certain grim beauty to be found in the rays of the early sun shining on the blackened waste. The dead grass had burned away leaving a perfect dead-black, feltex-like carpet, the trees still standing straight although burned mile after mile. Looking across country one could almost feel even the trees' melancholy as they stood straight up, utterly leafless,

solemnly and sadly surveying their fire-stricken domain, from which here and there, smoke lazily wafted up towards the sun.

The difference in the appearance of the fire in day and night is worth a remark or two of attempted description. At Wonga Park the fire from a distance was something big and gentle, majestic and smooth, just burning itself quietly away with its smoke hanging about like a golden cloak, the orange reflections of the fire striking through it. Even close up to the fire at night, unless it is really raging, the fire did not seem to be the devastating, all-destroying demon it was. But in the day-time at the various places, it was like some fierce, fighting, raging maniac that is never satisfied, always reaching out, pouncing on, gobbling up more food, roaring down gullies, crackling up hills, always looking and stretching for more, still more. At times one could realize how easy it would be to succumb to the fire, not to the flames or smoke or anything material, but some intangible almost hypnotic power that could easily, I felt, overpower one and draw one into the inferno.

At Yarra Glen eight of us were allotted to a Mr. Bill Field, a local bushman of about 35. With him we went off towards Toolangi and Taggart's Creek but could do nothing there; it was all burnt and burning back on itself. And so across to Wood's Point. The road was very bad and several times we had to stop and clean the road, in fact almost half of the journey was made across country, through the burnt out forests and flat country, fences had to be cut, and logs and trees surmounted. It was a great trip for a car – a Ford V8 1938 utility and should be a great advertisement for it. We eventually got to the town to find the place in ashes – 7 of 150 houses were left standing. One would have thought we were invaders from the sky, the way these poor people stared at us. They were a dazed, hopeless crowd. They'd had a shocking time, nothing to eat or drink, nowhere to sleep, roads impassable, no communications. And so the best thing we could do for them was to get back to civilization and send help and relief to them. And that trip to Warburton was a trip! What a car it was! Over the roughest country imaginable with the trees down, more cross country than road work – it's a wonder we got there safely. Anyway we got word of their plight to the authorities at Warburton. The papers say that the first relief truck turned over but I hear now that they were

evacuated from Mansfield and are mostly all at Seymour.

After refreshments back at Yarra Glen we were sent off to the Tunnel, but as there were enough men there to do the very little they could in the worst blaze I saw all the time, we hopped back to Yarra Glen. More to eat then off to Yering. It's a big property outside Yarra Glen. We had to immediately light breaks at some distance from the homestead in flat pastures and extend them on the south side of the house towards the fire bearing down 1½ miles away. A big job that, but we managed to completely put out that fire, and it was no small one either. There were 23 of us there and we earned the owner's, Kerr, a big Jersey, I think, breeder, gratitude (sic). They turned on a decent sort of hot lunch for us; roast lamb, potatoes and marrow, followed by stewed apricots and lemon sago, bread, butter, jam, cream, hot buns. A great feed.

And then back to Yarra Glen. Still the same nine, we were sent out on seven or eight trips to different points, to save houses menaced by the fire. On these occasions it was remarkable to see how a fire could be directed in practically any direction desired with the proper method of using breaks. Our tutor and guide, Bill Field, was particularly adept at this sort of thing, using methods which seemed too fantastic to be successful, but they turned out so beautifully planned that only two of our houses were lost and the rest, five or six, were saved!

(to be continued in our next Newsletter...)

If any readers have other personal anecdotes or information relating to the 1939 bushfires and their impact on Yarra Glen and district, the Society will be pleased to hear from you. Contact the Editor.

KATHLEEN BEACH

1916 - 2004

Kathleen Beach, a life member of the Yarra Glen & District Historical Society, passed away on 29 February 2004.

Kath was born in 1916 to Joseph and Catherine Melville and grew up in the care of the Salvation Army at the East Camberwell Girls Home. In 1940 she married Gordon Beach, a Kinglake farmer. They bought a dairy farm in Dixon's Creek in 1945 and, with a growing family of 3 daughters and a son, they farmed there until 1967. The family then moved to a home in Yarraview Road, Yarra Glen.

Noted for her many community activities, Kath was honoured with the Victorian Senior Citizen of the Year Award in 2000. Throughout her life she actively engaged in the work of the Salvation Army and the Red Cross, the Dixon's Creek School Council and Mothers Club. She was also a member of the Yarra Glen Senior Citizens, the CWA, the Eye and Ear Hospital Auxiliary, the Yarra Glen & Districts Living & Learning Centre, and the Yarra Glen Bowling Club.

Obituary – The Mail, 6 April 2004, p.10.