

My Experience of the Tasmanian Bushfire, 1967

Ruth Gee

On Thursday the 2nd February 1967 my husband and I left Sydney to holiday in Tasmania.

We arrived at 3.15p.m. and were met by our son Reginald, daughter-in-law Vina and grandsons Philip, Gavin and Martin, and were driven to their home "Katandra", Taroona.

It was a very warm weekend. The temperature was in the 90°s.

Tuesday 7th we woke to a very hot day and during the day the temperature soared to 102°.

About noon Vina suggested we take lunch down to Taroona Beach — pick up Philip and Gavin at their school and let them have a quick dip in their lunch hour — which we did. After lunch she ran them back to school.

By that time the heat was oppressive and a good deal of smoke haze over the city, so we returned home. It was then that we noticed small fires at the back of the Taroona hills.

Back at the house there was no power. I was nervous and felt that we should leave the house and go to some safe place in case the fires came closer and were a danger to us. Vina said she would stay and if the worst came, would try and save the house (as they were only renting it from friends). My husband decided to stay with her.

As the fire conditions worsened, I was frightened and felt a coward. Vina suggested she take myself and Martin (3 years old) to friends on the Taroona waterfront, which she did. She returned home and she and my husband held the fort. The time was about 1.30p.m. By this time the fire had grown worse and the wind much stronger and we felt the position was getting serious. We seemed safe where we were in Mrs McCormick's home. A few neighbours and their children were there too. We were all very worried and nervous. As time went by, the thick smoke caused a darkness obscuring the sun, and when the smoke was thinner the sun penetrating through gave an eerie redness over everything. Then the power was cut off. All this time we were anxious and did not know what was happening to the children at school, and I was wondering if Vina and my husband were safe. The fires were gradually creeping around the

foreshores and old Mr McCormick (on crutches) (I think it was he) suggested we should all go on to the beach, so we decided to scramble down the slope. I found it difficult with Martin, so a young boy took Martin from me. It was warm on the beach — the smoke caused a dark atmosphere — and strong winds. A number of adults, teenagers and children were also on the beach, some with their pets. We sat on the rocks with the water lapping over our feet, and watched the flames as they leaped up the tree tops. Martin was very good, just seemed a bit overawed with it all, so went for a short sleep on my lap. It was very windy and there was some danger that twigs from the trees might fall on us.

That afternoon as we sat watching the flames, with water over our feet, I closed my eyes and prayed that our families would be protected from harm, and that our Heavenly Father would soon bring that tragic fire to an end.

One young mother with a wee baby gave me a napkin and told me to wet it with water and put it over Martin to protect him from the heat and cinders which might fall. Very kind of her. The young boys and girls were wonderful. They went up and down the bank to the houses and brought down containers of water so as we could have a drink, as our mouths were very dry.

Sometime during that time Mrs McCormick came with the good news that all the school children had been evacuated from the school and were on the beach further round from us, and she said to me, "Your husband and daughter-in-law are safe". I almost wept. How she found out I do not know.

About 4.30p.m. (?) to our joy a southerly sprang up and changed the direction of the wind. Very few of us had any warm clothes, and we were still on the beach. I was sitting on a rock nursing Martin; there were two other little girls with us when someone gave us a rug and we all cuddled in together. One little girl had a pussy cat with her and Martin was very thrilled with it. It was not long after, that we all went up to Mrs McCormick's home again, and waited there until it was safe for us to return home. There was still no power — so we did not have any light nor were we able to make a cup of tea.

It must have been about 5.30p.m.(?) when Vina managed to get through to take us home.

My husband and Vina had fought the flames with two hoses and managed to save the home. They had a very worrying time.

My son Reginald was on his job (in the Derwent Valley, the other side of Hobart) all day, and was shocked when he returned to town to see the fire damage — but was so thankful when he found his wife and family safe — also the house.

The boys were brought home about 6 p.m. by one of the school teachers.

That night we took turns to sit up and watch that sparks from burning logs and trees did not blow onto the house. It was tragic that so many lost their lives and homes on "Ash Tuesday", but we thank our Heavenly Father that our loved ones and the home were saved.

This was written shortly after her return to Sydney and was found among the Late Mrs. Gee's personal papers after her death in 1976.



1967 Bushfires in Hinsby Road

Hilda George

Black Tuesday, as it has become known, dawned with the fireiest sunrise we had ever seen. My husband, Jack decided to photograph the unusual sight before breakfast and hurried down to the beach. This photograph became an only memento of that day and of the disaster which was to develop later on.

Once breakfast was over and he had left to go to work and the children gone to school, my ears, eyes and nose became sensitive to the increasing heat, glare, and smell of smoke. However, none of this was enough at the time to prepare me for later events.

Isolated in a lonely part of the Technical College that day, my husband was unaware of the situation which was growing with frightening speed, despite my attempts to phone him.

I cleared away the breakfast things and contemplated the usual morning chores. I became aware of growing apprehension and the wind becoming noticeably stronger. Trying to concentrate on my various tasks, I repeatedly made quick trips to the window, once down to the beach. The wind was increasing, the smell of smoke more noticeable. I was conscious of heightening tension and visited several elderly neighbours who were the only ones at home in the immediate area.

Early afternoon saw me plodding up Hinsby Road hill, seeking reassurance that things were not as serious as the hot gale-force wind and the smoke pall suggested. At the top of the hill I met our local Supermart Manager; he was gazing towards the horizon, which was hardly discernable due to the smoke haze. We exchanged our feelings of concern and he left to go about his affairs. I remained there a while, watching and pondering about the increasing smoke.

A man across the road was hosing his house, which I thought was a natural act of self-preservation, but I wondered if perhaps the water might be needed more in those places where firefighters would be wanting it most.

Hopefully deciding that the fire was being kept "under control", I walked back towards home, thinking how differently people react when facing serious trouble, some unselfishly and bravely, others confused in their priorities.

Twentieth Century

When halfway down the hill a great blast of wind rushed upon me and I wrapped my arms around an H.E.C. pole to save myself from being blown off my feet. Quite suddenly the sky became very dark, but before it became too dark to see, I made my way to the hedge-row and gateways in order to feel my way back to the house.

At the bottom of the hill I met an elderly neighbour. We discussed the best possible action. She decided to go down to the beach at once, with her pet animals and bird, whilst I would follow as soon as possible after locating our domestic animals. I dumped the cats into a sleeping bag to get them down to the beach.

The sun was totally obscured, the smoke now so thick that it was difficult to breathe, and the wind was ferocious. Suddenly the fire which had been distant, was here, around us. What best to do? Hoses were useless. Only a tiny trickle was coming through. The fire was a few yards from the neighbour's back fence and a stack of firewood was piled against it. If the fire got into that, the house would be threatened, if not from other directions.

As I stood there, uncertain as to what, if anything, I could do there appeared two indistinct smoke-blackened figures carrying buckets. With the black smoke and burning leaves and branches being whirled around, it was hard to decide if what one saw was real. Afterwards we became aware that our helpers were two of our neighbouring menfolk. They carted buckets of water from the sea and helped us and others to cope with the worst hazards. They helped greatly to ease our desperate situation. Back at our house my son had arrived home from work. Had he not been travelling by motor-bike he would have been unable to get home, for by now the road was blocked by fallen H.E.C. poles and burning debris. Car drivers were forced to a standstill, unable to reach their homes and families — a distressing situation.

Our son put our dinghy onto the beach. I remained for a while, doing what I could with wet sacks. I groped around in the dark, closed all windows and doors, felt my way around the house and then decided to try once more to contact my husband at work.

This led to an unusual experience, verging on the uncanny. Our phone was in the lounge. It was too dark to see the dial, I felt around

for matches, removed one from the box and was about to strike it when something, possibly the instinct born of self-preservation, seemed to cry out "DON'T". I took notice and didn't! Instead I located my torch, dialled my husband's number, but failed to get through, the lines having become jammed through so many callers causing an overload, and many lines being burnt down.

Another nearby neighbour, who was expecting a child very soon had found her way over to me. She had decided that she must go on the beach with her other babies and that the house must take its chance — rightly as life was more important. She was deeply perturbed about her other children at school, and what a responsibility this was for teachers who would not know if it were best to keep children with them at school, or try to get them home! I am glad to say that my friend's youngsters returned safely, as did my daughter who arrived in tears, begging me to leave everything and go on the beach at once, which we did. By this time even the trees at the beach were burning at ground level, due to the presence of dry leaves and under-growth.

It was then, as we expected the huge Eucalypts to ignite, that the wind, whose ferocity had swept the fire down from the skyline to the beach, reversed its direction and forced the fire back over burnt areas, thereby putting a virtual end to our terrifying experiences on Black Tuesday.



1967 Bushfires

Lorna Mein

I can only tell of the 1967 bushfires in our own particular corner of Tarooma. Now it is Karingal Court, but then we had on our southern border a large paddock covered with knee high very dry grass and our drive went up the hill to the Channel Highway where we shared our entrance with a house and two cottages, one of these was lost in the fires.

With the fire in the hills behind us and a howling wind blowing, we listened to advice given us on the radio. Out came our tall ladder as we hurriedly followed instructions to fill the gutterings with water and stop up the downpipes with tennis balls. As our downpipes were square, tennis balls were useless, so we improvised with sacking tightly bound and tied and jammed in at the top of the pipes. I filled the bath and every possible container with water. How lucky we were to have water, but owing to low pressure we could only use one hose. I ripped the cotton blankets off our beds, soaked these in cold water and we wrapped these round us to prevent sparks catching fire to our clothing.

The fire reached the trees and garden of the house near us; my husband went up to find its wood stack on fire and the big fir hedge well alight; he watered the roof of the house and the area around it. In the meantime, I saw a piece of bark well alight flying over our house and landing in the dead dry grass; in seconds the whole paddock was an inferno of flames being driven by a stiff northerly wind, right into the Rotary Camp.

I took the car out to go up the hill and fetch my husband, but as I went up the drive he came back by the creek so I turned around and returned to find our trees and garage and chicken house alight. We decided it was better to take the car to Sandy Bay as there was only a small space left between the house and fire and we were afraid of the petrol tank possibly igniting. My husband came with me as there were flames along our drive and it was so dark with smoke that we could not see that a car had parked across our entrance to the Channel Highway. Fortunately the bump was only a gentle one and we heard the car move on. My husband returned to our house and I set out for Sandy Bay. Emerging from the blackness

I spotted a couple carrying suitcases, obviously burnt out. So I picked them up and took them to friends in Sandy Bay.

Later I got a lift with a doctor to try and return to help my husband but we were stopped before the Tarooma boundary as the fire had crossed the road. That night we slept in our clothes and took it in turns to patrol as fires were still burning. Next morning there were no birds singing, nor for many mornings to come; there were NO BIRDS. Then many days later, much to my joy I saw a yellow winged honeyeater sitting in the tree by my bedroom and he flew straight round the house to the bird table where I always leave sugar and water for the honeyeaters. He perched on the table chattering away, but no others came to join him.



Looking up the hill behind St. Luke's Church Hall, March 1967. After the bushfires.

PHOTO GWENDA LORD.

Black Tuesday 7th February 1967

Pepita Nichols

The 7th February 1967 started off a warm day, particularly for Tasmania, and eventually reached 103 degrees Fahrenheit. There was no evidence of fire and while at work I was surprised when I heard that the doctor's surgery at Tarooma had burnt down and residents of Tarooma were advised to return home. My first thoughts were for the safety of my horse, and that of my girlfriend.

Driving along Sandy Bay Road at 2.30 it was very quiet. Upon reaching my home in Flinders Esplanade, there was no indication of fire in the area, no smoke, only the searing sun beating down. I decided to go across the paddock and check the water.

The paddock I refer to is now known as Karingal Court, but in 1967 this area was divided into two large paddocks, with a shed, stable and tack room. It was known by all Tarooma residents for the daffodils and jonquils which grew there profusely. Mr Shoobridge owned the paddock and allowed us to keep our horses there for many years. The "shortcut" to the paddock was to go via the beach and climb up the side of the creek dividing Karingal Court and Flinders Esplanade.

I wandered over and, upon reaching the paddock, looked up and saw Pegasus and Sabre standing quietly near the top entrance of the paddock. I started to walk up and turned back to look at the sea. In the split second in which I turned my head fire appeared from nowhere in front of me and then along the cliff edge. There was a break in the centre and I ran towards it, got through, and was able to get to the top of the paddock. I realised I would not have time to catch the horses as the whole paddock was alive with fire and flames were crackling through the trees. The smoke was extremely thick. I dropped the slip rail and pushed the animals through. They galloped off up the drive to take their chances. I really thought I would never see them again.

I managed to get through to my friend's home in Stewart Crescent and had to wait there, as the Channel Highway was cut off by the fire.

Some time later we went back to the paddock. All that remained was the blackened ground. The sheds, fences and trees were burnt, but two homes on the property were intact.

Our horses survived. They had galloped up Stewart Crescent where a quick thinking neighbour had shut them in her garage until the danger had passed. Pegasus at that time was eighteen years old and lived until his thirtieth year.

We were fortunate also with our home. The fire had burnt completely around the house, burning the back stairs and all the fences, but my car which was parked outside the front door remained untouched.



Pegasus and Sabre in the paddock now known as Karingal Court, 5th February 1967.

PHOTO PEPITA NICHOLS