

# 71 people died in fires which swept through Victoria

At nightfall on Friday, January 13, 1939, there was nothing left of the tiny Victorian town of Noojee except one house, the hotel and 74 residents, who huddled in a creek, with blankets over their heads, daring not to look out on the devastation that surrounded them.

All night, on the blackest Friday in Victorian history, they kept their terrible vigil as around them roared the worst fires in the State's history. On several long fronts, the ferocious flames had ripped across the countryside and turned their lives into a living hell.

It wasn't until two days later — Sunday, January 15 — that relief came with a change of wind which brought heavy rain to douse the fires. The panic and sheer terror was over, but nothing could mitigate the scenes of utter desolation that faced the 74 citizens of Noojee, who had maintained a last stand at their town — and survived.

Others were not so lucky — 71 people died in the short time it took to turn the Garden State into a state of ruin. Men and animals suffered excruciating deaths. Some of their bodies were found charred beyond recognition, others were totally unmarked after having been asphyxiated by the thick, black smoke.

So intense and out-of-control was the inferno that the role of the firefighters was limited to trying to save lives. In just two days, thousands of square kilometres out of a total State area of only 227,620 square kilometres were burnt black.

The little timber town of Noojee, with its pre-fire population of just 220 souls, came to symbolise the strength of character, physical bravery and emotional true grit that emerges when man battles the terrible forces of nature.

Of all Australia's States, Victoria has suffered the most from bushfires, particularly in the forests of the Otway Peninsula and Gippsland. The threat comes each year, with a combination of long, dry summers, northerly winds and dense, inaccessible forest vegetation.

Late in 1938, all these factors were there, compounded by a severe drought which saw most creeks dry, rivers running low, reservoirs at a critical level and water restrictions imposed on the people of Melbourne and most Victorian country towns.

By early December, the grass was brown and shrivelled and the forests were tinder dry when small bushfires began flaring up, often several hundred kilometres apart. There was no cause for concern, the people were told — the fires were under control.

But they were still burning by the time people took their Christmas and New Year break.

By January 8, the fires were raging with a new intensity. Two days later, many of them were linking up to form frighteningly wide fronts and begin a slow, inexorable advance across the State.

By Tuesday, January 10, the first two deaths had occurred, when two forestry officers were trapped in the Toolangi forest, 50km north-east of Melbourne.

By Thursday, January 12, the death toll had reached 19. That day in Melbourne, the temperature was already 36.9 degrees by 9am. At noon it was 42.9 degrees and, by then, the city was ringed with fires.

Toolangi, just 50km away, was still burning, while other fires swept through the thick timber stands of the Rubicon, Archeron and Tanjil Rivers. Others were blazing between Lorne and Warrnambool on the south-west coast, north of Portland, in the rich pastoral areas of the western district, and in isolated patches in the Wimmera wheat belt.

But they were at their most devastating in the thick forests of the Great Divide where sawmills disappeared in puffs of smoke.

In the Victorian Alps, Omeo and Bright were threatened and houses and properties on the outskirts of the towns were destroyed. Eventually most of the Alpine areas were

## 'Black Friday' horror

were lifted out of the soil like matchsticks, with roots and rocks still clinging to them.

The little town of Noojee, nestling in the hills south of Toolangi, had already been destroyed by fire in 1926 and was to be engulfed again.

The main link between fire control headquarters and the town's 220 citizens was the switchboard of Mrs Gladys Sanderson, the acting-postmistress and mother of three children.

On Friday the 13th, the town-folk gathered around the small wooden Post Office to learn that the threat of their town going up again was increasing rather than diminishing.

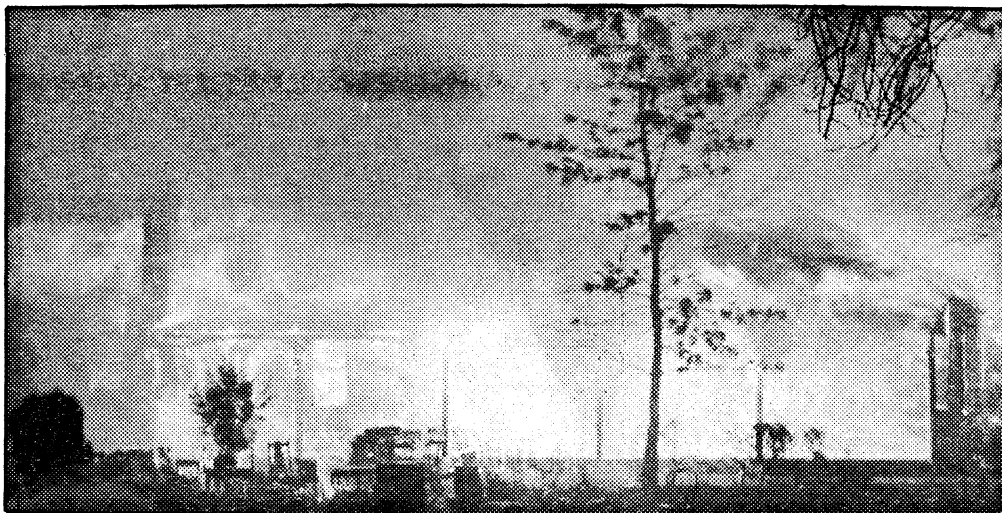
defeat. So close and hot were the flames that Armstead feared the wooden trucks carrying his refugees would become their crematoriums.

Another fear was the trestle bridges over the gullies, some of which were already smouldering as he approached them. He then had to waste precious minutes by getting out and making sure they would bear the weight of the train before he would flag it on.

One of the bridges did collapse almost as soon as the train had passed over it.

Arthur Armstead got his train-load of precious cargo to safety but now the town was completely cut off and, for those who remained, there was no respite from the terror.

A graphic description of the inferno was given by Judge Leonard Stretton, who later headed a Royal Commission to investigate the fires. "Sixty-nine mills were burnt. Millions of acres of pine forest, of most incalculable value, were destroyed or badly damaged. Townships were obliterated in a few minutes.



It was the middle of the day when this photo was taken, but the only light came from the flames as they ripped through a home at the height of the Black Friday fires.

ravaged.

To the west of Melbourne, the whole of the Grampian Range was on fire, as were the Otway Ranges in the south-west, where the fires advanced on such a wide front that they threatened to sweep down to the sea and take with them the holiday towns of Lorne and Apollo Bay.

By Friday, January 13, it appeared that the entire State was alight and there was practically no part which was not threatened. That day dawned even hotter than before — 35.8 degrees at 9am and 45 degrees at 3pm, with the thermometer peaking at 45.6 degrees, the highest official reading in Melbourne.

At the height of the fires, relative humidity was down to 4 per cent, while scorching winds from the north reached speeds of almost 120km/h.

At midday, in many places, it was as dark as night, with people carrying hurricane lamps as they sought safety.

The voluntary bushfire brigades and the thousands of volunteers from every country town were powerless. Normally, they would make a clearing in the path of the advancing fire, but this was made futile by high winds, which simply carried chunks of burning bark across the breaks to start a fresh fire. Even huge trees

As Mrs Sanderson announced that the fires were raging around Warburton and Powelltown, 76km east of Melbourne, and were racing before the wind towards Noojee, half the population decided it was time to quit.

It was just before noon that the hundred or so who had decided to stay heard the deep roar of the two mighty walls of flames which were converging on the town. The only way out was on the goods train, which was due to leave at 3.10pm for Warragul, on the main line.

The train's guard, Arthur Armstead, however, wasn't going to pay heed to any timetable. Realising the dire peril, he coupled up his train and told those remaining that anyone who wanted to could come with him.

Twenty-one people, mainly the timber-cutters' wives and children, were loaded into the trucks just before the train chugged off on a nightmare journey through the inferno.

As it rumbled from the station, Armstead saw fires on top of the ridge and watched as they swept through the stands of mountain ash towards the town. From that moment, the goods train and the fire were locked in a deadly race, with the train often only metres from

"Mills, houses, bridges, tramways, machines were burned to the ground; men, cattle, horses, sheep were devoured by the fires or asphyxiated by the scorching, debilitated air. Steel girders and machinery were twisted by heat as if they had been of wire.

"Balls of crackling fire sped at a great pace in advance of the fires, consuming, with a roaring, explosive noise, all that they touched. Houses of brick were seen and heard to leap into a roar of flames before the fires had reached them."

The firefighting facilities were totally inadequate. The Victorian Forests Commission reported: "Friday, 13 January, 1939, was ushered in with freshening northerly winds, which rapidly developed into blistering gales, temperatures soared to record heights and humidity was reduced to practically zero.

"The fires throughout the State, which had been temporarily lulled, sprang into life, with renewed vigor, and advanced on wide fronts. It was a day of terror in country districts, made more terrible by the pall of complete darkness which enveloped many areas during the afternoon.

"Scenes of incredible devastation were left in the wake of the flames. In the course of this tragic day the death toll



Russell Sharp stands next to the water tank in which he found the body of a man who had been boiled to death after seeking refuge from the inferno.

increased to over 70, townships, mills and buildings were razed to the ground and hundreds of square miles of forest and farming land laid waste."

The Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works Engineer, A.E. Kelso, described the firestorm he had seen in the Wongungarra Valley: "The fire was extensive and, as we watched for a few moments, a great gout of flame burst across the top of the forest, and the fire, forest and everything was blotted out by it.

"We came to the conclusion that what was actually happening was distillation of the forest itself, so it was not possible for enough oxygen to have had access to the heart of the fire or be drawn up so that it could be used on the outskirts of that fire.

"Therefore the inflammable gas was drawn up to a height, not burning at all. It rose up from the forest until it was high enough to ignite, and actually did ignite.

"A burst of sweeping flame rushed across the forest for miles at a time, leaving a great cloud of black smoke."

There were many horror stories as temperatures reached 47.7 degrees. At one timber mill where 15 men died, one had sought shelter in a water tank, which boiled dry — with the man still in it. Others were roasted in a sawdust heap in which they had buried themselves.

One man fleeing the fires was caught by the thorns of a blackberry bush which held him fast as he burned to death. Four men, who ran to save a dog, were engulfed in a tongue of flame, as gas, driven before the wind, exploded.

At Rubicon, where 12 died, women and children were hauled up a mountainside in a tiny, narrow-gauge truck, powered by an electric winch, through an archway of burning and exploding trees.

Thick, black smoke covered the State, even drifting as far east as Auckland, New Zealand. The smoke carried embers, which rained onto Melbourne itself.

Meanwhile, at Noojee, the remaining 74 residents were fighting a hopeless battle. Fire quickly encircled the town and the wooden houses, bombarded by flying embers, literally exploded in the intense heat.

Postmistress Gladys Sanderson continued to operate the telephone exchange as the fires advanced from house to house towards the Post Office.

But when it became clear that nothing could be saved, the timber workers retreated to the creek, taking with them whatever they could salvage — wireless sets, sewing machines — all of which were hurled into the water.

Mrs Sanderson was the last

to leave the town and her final call was to a neighboring town: "I am about to close down now as the flames are licking the building. I have locked the valuables in the safe and I am going to the creek. If the worst comes to the worst, you'll find the keys of the safe and the office strapped to my wrist."

The walls of the Post Office were actually smouldering when she locked the safe door and went to join the other townspeople, including a few women, one with a nine-month old child, in the creek.

Only two buildings survived — the pub, and the home of the Cornwall family. Young Tom Cornwall, a mill boy, had heard the thunder of the flames cutting him off from home, where "mum and the rest of the kids were waiting".

Filling his billy with water from the creek, he soaked his handkerchief and held it to his face as he stumbled through the cinders and smoke to his home.

The Cornwall house stood in a small clearing and, by constantly soaking the walls with water, the family survived unharmed.

Those in the creek crouched chin deep in the muddy water, their heads covered with blankets, others under a water wheel to protect them from the sparks.

Mrs Sanderson was later dubbed "The Angel of Black Friday" and awarded the Order of the British Empire. "I don't know why I've been singled out," she said. "A lot of people stood up to the job and stayed on duty till the last minute. I only did what anybody would have done."

Relief finally came on Sunday, January 15, when rain fell with a fury across the State, extinguishing the flames with an almighty sizzle. As the smoke cleared, what emerged was a charred land, littered with the bodies of thousands of horses, cattle and sheep.

The official count was 71 people burned to death or asphyxiated, while 69 sawmills, 1280 houses and more than 1.25 million hectares of forest had been destroyed.