

The History of Electricity Fires in Victoria.

Part 1

A harrowing account by farmer

Colin McKenzie

on dealing with the

Tatyoon-Streatham fire

of 12th February 1977,
and its aftermath.

This reproduction of Exhibit 325 was created January 2011
by M. Gunter, mickgg@suburbia.com.au

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VPRS 13230/P1 1939 – 1983, Unit 11, Item: “Exhibits : Folder 15, No. 305 – 332”

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Preface

A board of Inquiry was set up after raging firestorms caused havoc and death across much of Victoria on 12th February 1977. The inquiry found that many of the fires were caused by sparks from electricity distribution lines. This reproduction of one inquiry exhibit, being the diary of a farmer, gives a powerful and graphic account of the terror, suffering and loss caused by Victoria's firestorms. Subsequent parts to be published in this “**The History of Electricity Fires in Victoria**” series will delve into the statistical and technical records of similarly caused fires in 1974, 1969 and 1968. Subsequently, in 1983 and 2009, Victoria suffered similar calamities, with by far the worst human death toll occurring after a frayed, rusted live power line broke at Kilmore East on Black Saturday 2009. The resultant firestorm killed 119 people.

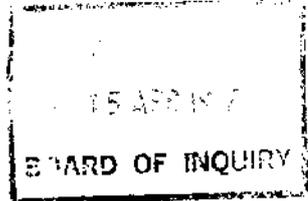
Nineteen seventy-seven was perhaps unique in that **one hundred percent** of the six deaths caused by fire on 12th February were started by “live” electricity distribution wires (or fuses) sparking by themselves, or upon coming into contact with trees. The Tatyoon-Streatham fire that Mr McKenzie was mainly involved with was caused by a sugar gum branch falling on a live high voltage SWER line. Two men were killed: Graham Dunn and Richard George Hunt. Seven other people at least were hospitalized with burns.

M. Gunter
North Melbourne
January 2011



VICTORIAN FARMERS' UNION

FARRER HOUSE, 24-28 COLLINS STREET, MELBOURNE, 3000
TELEPHONE: 63-9281 TELEGRAPHIC ADDRESS: "VICFARMERS", MELBOURNE



14th April, 1977

Mr R.A. Sebire,
Secretary,
Board of Inquiry into the Occurrence
of Bush and Grass Fires in Victoria,
8th Floor,
Nubrik House,
MELBOURNE Vic. 3000

Dear Mr Sebire,

I enclose a signed diary of the experiences of a Mr Colin McKenzie
of Lake Bolac, in the Streatham fire on 12th February.

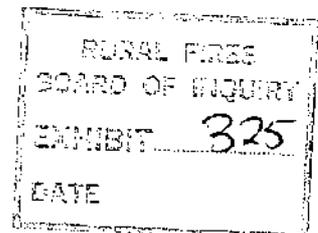
I submit this document at this stage as it may be of assistance
to Mr Nixon when dealing with the Streatham fire. Mr McKenzie is
prepared to co-operate in any way but the V.F.U. will be using his
experience in the relief work as part of our final submission.

I have another farmer at Derrinallum preparing a similar diary.

Yours sincerely,

K.P. Shea
for K.P. SHEA

KPS/mm
Enc



February 12th was an extreme day, temperature 95°F, wind up to 50 mph, due north. All sport was cancelled and everyone standing by. I received a call about 1 p.m. that a fire was burning at Merrin Merrin. I left immediately to pick up my brother. Our father didn't want us both to go, due to danger at home, so I went and my brother remained with a second unit. Visibility was very bad due to dust. The truck I was driving had a maximum speed of 30 mph when driving into the wind, I got temporarily lost and a lady redirected me. No signs of flames, just smoke and dust. I saw a truck speeding towards me which I signalled to stop. It was driven by Graham Dunn of Streatham. He advised me that the fire was two miles ahead of me. He was going back to his farm when a second fire, which had started at Tatyoon, was heading. The pall of smoke confirmed this. He declined my offer to accompany him suggesting I was needed ahead. It is now history that he went straight to his home where he lost his life.

I met two or three other trucks leaving that fire to return to Streatham. I drove to where the fire had started and then followed its path till I came to where it was burning on the fringe. I started the fire pump and followed Skipton fire truck mopping up behind them. Occasionally, I had to return to a piece that had relit. After some time a small piece relit well behind me and before I could return, it jumped to a huge width and height and roared up behind us. The other truck drove out on the burnt ground, through to smoke, ash and dust and I followed his lights. There were huge rocks on the ground. We all huddled together with handkerchiefs over our noses. Two haystacks were burning about 250 yards away, upwind, and the heat was intense. As soon as possible, we moved further away.

I then mopped up at the fringe of the new wing of the fire until warned by the Pura Pura fire truck that I was in danger from another break out behind me again. By now, I couldn't tell any directions and had no idea where I was. I joined a group of men and trucks on the burnt area who were using a radio and deciding tactics. They had heard over the radio that a fire was burning west of Lake Bolac, where I live. We decided I should head towards home. I think that was where I heard that Streatham had been burned. I drove as fast as conditions would allow till I reached the gravel road. Someone directed me to help to try to keep the other fire from crossing the Streatham-Merrin road. I got there, about 3 miles, as quickly as possible. Hearing the fire, I saw a man on a motor bike race into a paddock, away from the fire. When I got to the fire, it was already across and in the grass on the side, then into a large pine plantation. Large rocks and gutters foiled any slim chance of holding it. Two boys, about 17, offered to man my truck. I agreed. They had no shirts, wearing jeans and "Adidas" shoes. I warned them to be careful and then, because of the plantation, had to drive about a mile back to the gate where I had seen the motorcyclist. We were now on "Korhong".

The speed of the fire was such that the front of the fire was now out of sight, several paddocks away. I saw the motor cycle drive through the fire again. We went back to the pine plantation which was alight to about 40 feet high. There were two units there, one each side, so we went along putting out the fringe. We went about 1/4 mile when we ran out of water. We asked another truck to take over. We went to a dam out of the fire to fill. A large mob of Herefords were there, some grazing, some lying down. The edge of the fire was about half a mile from them.

With other trucks that were there now we put the fire out for about two miles (estimated). The country was very ^{stony} strong. At one stage, we had to drive up a rocky barrier with a relit fire behind us. Again we had a truck to follow. Someone looked back. The trucks had left the pine plantation and allowed it to get away again behind us. The whole effort was wasted. We all went back. My truck got caught between a deep drain and the fire, and I again had to go through the fire and sit on the burnt ground, not able to see. When it cleared we got the fire out which was now right near the cattle which remained undisturbed. The motor cyclist was riding around. We went back to the pines. It was a wide plantation and units had trouble getting the centre out. I suggested we cut the fence (remarkably still standing). The motor cyclist objected strongly. While we argued, a powerful unit managed to back in and we got the fire contained.

We went back to the road to follow the fire and a lady in a car stopped us and asked us to help back where the other (Nardin) fire had started. The wind was in the south-west now. The fire had relit almost exactly at the start and was threatening two homes. Luckily, it was in a swamp and controlled quickly near the homes. One home had a lot of horses in the yard. The head of the fire raced on well ahead of the trucks and eventually ran into the burnt area of the Tabyoon fire. Many Gehl rolls were set alight. The trucks all gathered together and I wanted to go towards my home, being unsure of its safety. The two boys decided to go on another truck and follow the fire towards Carranballac.

This was a lucky move. They had been sitting on top of the water tank while I travelled. I was travelling at 35 mph, and locking across at Graham Dunn's burnt house when I hit semi alive power lines. They were about 4 feet high across the road diagonally. The truck slowed to the right, then one wire went over the top of the truck, wrecking the lights and breaking the frame at the back of the cabin. The truck veered left, then right as the other wire held. I saw the burnt out pole rise off the fence ahead of me as the second wire tightened, then fall as that wire also went over the top. The truck went off the road to the left, down a bank and reached the far fence before I had control. The boys would have been killed had they been on the back. I was lucky. I could feel the voltage going through the truck. The truck had a broken front spring as well as the other damage.

I waited by the line and stopped all traffic. Two girls got the SEC who cut the wires. I drove into Streatham, I think it would be about six o'clock. I was overcome with emotion at what I saw. A devastated town. Noone knew who was safe and who wasn't. I saw a Lake Bolac

man who told me that Lake Bolac was safe. I was about to fill up and follow the fire to Carranballac when the police, Senior Constable Wright, asked me to put out a burnt bridge. I picked up a man and we couldn't find the bridge, false information. We did put out a small fire restarted in a stubble. Back at Streatham, I got news that the fire was contained. With four others, we went out shooting sheep till well after dark.

SUMMARY OF FIRE DAY

1. It would be nearly impossible for anyone not present to realise the heat of the fire; the speed - a galloping horse couldn't stay ahead; the smoke and ash in the air. An army of men couldn't stop it in the early afternoon. Haystacks which would normally smoulder for days were reduced to one inch of ash in minutes, the sheds completely buckled and the iron blown away. Most fences, regardless of construction, were flat on the ground, only the metal components left, and even those were brittle from over heat.
2. Apart from the motor cyclist, I didn't see anyone act in any way that didn't deserve the highest credit.
3. The local policeman, Stan Wright, had the situation in hand at all times when things were most hectic; as did all the local CFA men, volunteers; the ladies with food and drinks, and nursing sisters and many others.

On Sunday morning, my brother Bill helped me put a buckrake on the front-end loader of my tractor. I drove the tractor the 18 miles to Streatham, arriving about 8.00 a.m. Men were gathering in the street where Constables Wright and Spittle were despatching them to farms where assistance was most urgently required. They had supplies of ammunition which were allotted to shooters as needed. Tip trucks were needed and some went home to get them. Every able-bodied man was there with the necessary requirements. Bob Stewart came in and requested help so I went to his farm. His brother, Fraser, from Torquay (see Appendix I) had a "Bobcat" in operation digging a hole for burnt stock. Fraser's son, Peter, had a tip truck and we went to a heap of about 400 sheep, and loaded the truck. The bodies had to be lifted onto the buckrake and stacked. We could put on about sixteen which would then be loaded onto the truck. The truck, which had high sides, held about seventy sheep. Trucks which came later without sides, held only about twenty-five or thirty. The sheep in heaps were so severely cooked that frequently their insides fell out or their legs would come off when they were lifted.

More men were arriving all the time. Some helped us. Some took rifles and shot the sheep that were scattered in ones and twos as far as the eye could see. Some sheep just sat waiting for a bullet. Others, although horribly burned, could run almost as fast as usual. Some men built a temporary yard where a composite mob was yarded. There were two or three owners involved and although many sheep were destroyed, a lot of this mob were saved. The saved ones were loaded onto stock trucks (Appendix II) and moved to district farms who had offered to take them until the owner could organise otherwise. It was no mean feat to load sheep in such circumstances - each sheep had to be manhandled on - about twenty men involved. Many of these men were from Bob's wool firm in Geelong. The stock agents (Appendix

III) were magnificent in arranging agistment. At about five o'clock Peter and I with many others had all the stock on Bob Stewart's and several neighbours shot and in the pits waiting to be covered. Being strange to the area we didn't know who owned which paddocks. Fences were non-existent. The Shire of Ripon equipment moved in so I left to return to Streatham and receive another job.

As soon as I reached town, Stan Wright guided me to more sheep near the town. There were two local trucks sent to help plus four or five local men. Also following were three car loads of S.E.S. men. I pulled up near the first heap. I started to load sheep on. The S.E.S. men then converged and stacked them on for us. Having just arrived, they were full of energy whereas the locals were dog tired. We soon filled the available trucks and had to wait quite a while. The S.E.S. men were very "green" and some of their suggestions not practical. However, they bolstered a flagging workforce.

On return to Streatham, Constable Wright asked would I be "hay and stock co-ordinator" for the fire. I expressed reluctance because (a) the locals knew what to do without being told; (b) there were dozens of S.E.S. and police there by now with seemingly little to do; (c) because I was operating one of the few tractors and loaders, I felt I should stay on, but eventually agreed that I would. The burial of stock was going OK, but there were thousands still to be covered. It had been a hot day and the stock had decomposed badly.

I had a meal, which was most welcome as I had eaten little since 6.00 a.m. There was a lot of beer and soft drink available, all donated by local publicans. A meeting conducted by the policeman in charge outlined the administrative procedures for the "Disaster Period". Among other things, he said that the "S.E.S." were in charge of "hay co-ordination". I thought that this was good as far as I was concerned. Nothing else was said concerning that during the meeting except a request by the S.E.S. for black boards, of which I offered two. After the meeting, the Officer in Charge of S.E.S. said he wasn't in charge of hay and it was up to me to do it (because they were too busy). He said to get "three or four" girls to answer the phone and record information. As well, I would need all my own furniture.

I was back in Streatham about 7.30 a.m. next morning, Monday, with one girl to take the phone calls, table, chairs, paper, pens, black boards, etc. We were positioned at a phone near a window in the office. All went well, we made inventories of all offers of hay, grain or agistment, and I had three VFU men doing surveys of the victims' needs. We were flat out but several of the police complimented us on our work. At 10.00 a.m. we were told to leave the office and sit on the verandah. All calls were to be answered by a police woman who would hand them to the S.E.S. men who would radio them to the highway. Our job was to sit on the verandah and every now and then would receive a list from the S.E.S. of what was done to record. However, it was still "essential" that we be there, they said. We were not allowed to use the phone for out going or incoming calls.

At about 2.00 p.m. a call came for men to round up a mob of 4,000 sheep in a swamp. I had not done any work for 4 hours, so I left the girl to record the "messages" and went with the group of six men. It was another hot day and when we found that the sheep had to be all drafted and loaded through cattle yards which held about 100 at a time, I went back for more men. I also asked the Salvation Army if they could take out food and drinks as it was obvious that the job would take till after dark. They readily agreed. Some men refused to go, as they disliked the attitude of the owner. However, about 30 in total agreed to help. Suddenly, a fire broke out and we took all available trucks out to control it. It took about two hours to get back. I then went back where we finished the other job, including shooting about fifty burnt sheep, well after dark. The owner had gone home to Ballarat hours before. That night, as every other night, I had a long list of messages to ring people when I arrived home. This went well into the night.

On Tuesday morning, I had intended to sell some surplus sheep to clear a paddock to "agist" somebody's saved sheep. However, the ordered truck broke down, so the sheep had to be put back. The agent had already organised 5/1 sheep to arrive from Graham Dunn's so we let the arrangement stand. With the stock agent, I went to Graham Dunn's funeral in Ballarat, and arrived back at Streatham about 1.00 p.m. As soon as I arrived back, a Lake Bolac man asked me if I would spend the afternoon with him getting details from victims for statistics. Again, I said that I felt I could be better employed. I asked why the police or S.E.S. who were both there by the death, couldn't do it. He replied that they were "too bloody busy".

I heard some terrific stories of courage as we spoke to these people. As a general rule, any person with the guts to stay at home through the fire, saved their home. A lot said modestly, that it wasn't guts, they didn't have time to get away, anyhow, on the way home that night I checked some very badly burned sheep on a paddock near the town at Lake Bolac. They were in a very bad state with hooves coming off and lips so swollen that I don't think they had eaten or drunk since the fire, I was very late phoning people that night. The whole network of the VFU was achieving magnificent results with Government aid, hay, agistment, etc.

On Wednesday morning, I took a load of my hay to the burned sheep in Lake Bolac. They had deteriorated so much overnight that I got an experienced farmer to check them with me. He advised me to destroy nearly all of them. The local policeman, who had done such a magnificent job early, and now had been almost relegated to a "messenger boy", gave permission to destroy them. (The owner wishes not to be involved at all with them). The shoot was arranged for 1.30 p.m. and it took nearly that long to get them to yards, so poor was their condition. Before the shoot was due to start a message came that a Government vet wished to inspect them, and not to proceed. We had all the men and trucks there. The vet said not to destroy them as he wished to go through them himself, but was unavailable until Friday. I was to put them back and organise a footbath for Friday.

The rest of Wednesday, Thursday and Friday morning were spent at Streatham mainly on livestock and tractor work. On Friday afternoon, I got the sheep in again and when the vet arrived I was asleep in the ute waiting. We caught every sheep and "turned them up in hot dusty yards. We found that they were aged wethers, many with unsound mouths and pizzles. The vet stated that the sheep were uninsured. We treated all the sheep and walked them through a footbath of jettling fluid, to destroy any maggots in their feet. About thirty were raddled for destruction, but the vet decided to give them a chance. They were all put back in their paddock. On Friday night, in discussion, several of us agreed that we had worked over 100 hours in the past week.

* Saturday was the day destined to be the clean-up of burnt homes and buildings. The S.E.S. were in charge. I arrived early and a Streatham man asked me if I would load his burnt car onto a truck for him, using the low-loader. I agreed. We took the tractor down but the buck-rake was too light, so we went back to my ute and put on the bucket. When we returned we were stopped by a S.E.S. girl with a two way radio. She asked where we were going and if we had permission, was the tractor registered with the S.E.S. for use, was I registered, etc. She made us wait for 40 minutes because she couldn't get H.Q. to reply. Then we saw his car go past on the truck. Someone else had loaded it. I left her and went to work clearing a site in Streatham. About two hours later she appeared again and said H.Q. wanted to speak to me again, then she took another twenty minutes to raise them, making me wait. Next a man came on and cross-examined me about the car, etc. He wanted to know where it was, etc. I finished the conversation after about ten minutes by telling him he was wasting my time, and a few other things. We spent all day cleaning up in Streatham with the service clubs. The C.F.A. communications were excellent, the S.E.S., with an administrative staff far bigger, were chaotic.

* In the following weeks, the police and the S.E.S. drifted away. The C.F.A., V.F.U., Department of Agriculture and especially the locals from surrounding areas continued at their same pace. The response from people has been wonderful, but it has been proved that the understanding of locals is more effective than too much high-powered administration.

I have put a lot of time into the sheep near Lake Bolac. One hundred died during the next month and all bodies had to be moved away. The bodies were becoming a problem, so with the authority of the police, I shot those that were in pain. We were able to sell 170 for the owner, and they averaged \$6.50 (six weeks after the fire), helped by a \$2 rise in the market.

We crutched Graham Dunn's sheep and it was obvious that many of them were old and in a poor state, in fact, unlikely to survive the winter. With Graham's widow's permission, the stock agent and I inspected every sheep and sold 121 of the very worst. They averaged \$6.35.

There has been criticism of indiscriminate destruction of livestock. I think it is unjustified. Admittedly, if I had my way I would have destroyed about half of the mob of old wethers at Lake Bolac.

APPENDIX I

Fraser Stewart is the brother of Streatham farmer, Bob Stewart, who was burnt out on 12th February. He is a contractor at Torquay.

He heard about the fires in the Tatyoon-Streatham area on 12th February and then loaded his trucks and machinery and supplies. He arrived at Streatham at 9.00 p.m. that night, prepared to help anyone - not knowing that his brother had been affected.

Many other farmers and private contractors acted in a similar way although they were closer to the area. In conjunction with the local shire (Ararat), many were at work early that morning (Sunday, 13th February) illustrating the capacity of people to help their neighbours.

APPENDIX II

The work carried out by local farmers and stock carriers needs to be appreciated. They transported stock from farm to farm from Sunday, 13th February till the end of that week without reward. No doubt, the immediate transfer of stock to available fodder and water was a major factor in reducing losses in the days following the fire.

APPENDIX III

The involvement of the local stock and station agents in organising agistment for stock was immediate and well organised. Generally, each agent arranged for his clients stock to be moved to another clients' farm on a person to person basis. As this work needed to be done as quickly as possible, the stock agents' role was vital. In some cases, the local agent worked solely on fire work and organising agistment for stock for very long hours also without reward.

Colin R. McKenzie

13 - 4 - 77.