



The great teaching event: memories of the 1961 bushfires

It has been 50 years since the Dwellingup, Karridale and Crowea fires swept through the south-west, devastating townships and teaching profound lessons to forest and bushfire managers. A new book recalls the horrors of the fires from the people who experienced them firsthand.

by Roger Underwood

“**T**he roaring sound. What I remember most is the tremendous roar and crackling, as the flames raced through the trees and into the town. What I remember next is the faces, especially of those gathered at the pub whose loved ones were missing and feared lost.”

So begins a memoir of the 1961 Dwellingup fire written by retired forester Jim Williamson, who was there the night the town burned. It is one of 47 dramatic and emotionally charged stories collected in a new book commemorating the 50th anniversary of Western Australia’s blackest summer.

In that summer, bushfires burned perhaps a million hectares across the



southern half of the state. Four towns were consumed. Bridges, roads, railways, schools, hospitals, churches, homesteads and business premises were lost or damaged. Hundreds of thousands of hectares of farm and bushland were incinerated. Untold millions of native

animals were wiped out. The losses and the costs of the fires were incalculable. And, although no human lives were lost, the psychological scars on those who survived them have, in many cases, never healed.

Early signs

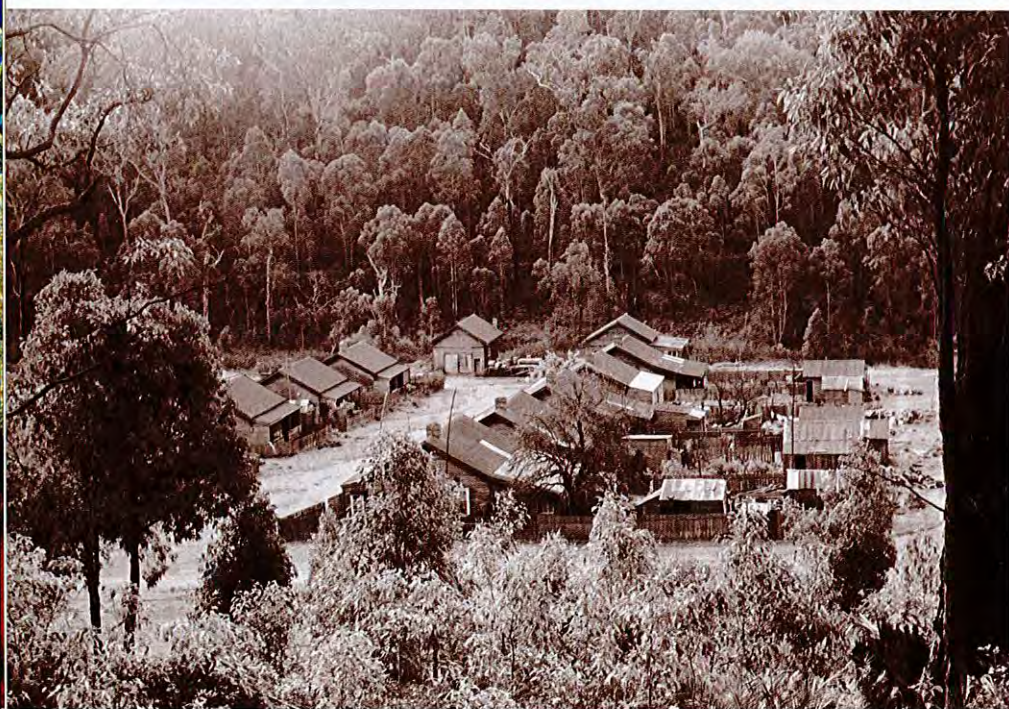
By late spring of 1960 it was clear a bad fire season was looming. Winter rains had been above average, but conditions soon dried up and the first heatwaves began to roll through. By Christmas a number of serious fires had occurred. What followed, however, was beyond expectations: a summer punctuated by extreme heatwaves and severe atmospheric instability, as anticyclones in the south interacted with tropical cyclones in the north, and lightning storms swept the south-west forest country.

To make things worse, much of this forest carried heavy, long-unburnt fuels. The then Forests Department had introduced a policy of broad-acre fuel reduction burning in 1954 but, by 1961, the new burning program had scarcely made a dent in the fuel accumulations of the previous 30 years.

Lightning strikes twice

“I was the DFO [district manager] at Dwellingup,” recalls retired bushfire specialist Frank Campbell. “We knew we were in trouble on the afternoon of the 19th January when a big thunderstorm moved in and the lookout towers started to report lightning strikes. By 6.30pm we had plotted six separate fires. Four new fires were located the next morning and by afternoon the number of fires, and their extent, exceeded our capacity to control them.”

The problem for the fire controllers at Dwellingup was that the same lightning storm that dealt them such a



Previous page

Main Nanga Brook, 25 January 1961.

Photo - The West Australian

Above left The Dwellingup forestry office, before the fire.

Left Nanga townsite before the fire.

Photos - DEC



heavy blow had also moved right across the Mundaring, Jarrahdale, Harvey and Collie forest districts, and then extended down into the karri forest. Every man and machine the department possessed was now firefighting. The job they did was remarkable, and almost every fire was caught and suppressed in the first 24 hours.

But the lightning came again

On the evening of 20 January, under conditions of high winds and searing temperatures, a second massive lightning storm flickered down the forest country, starting numerous new fires. These added another layer of complexity to the harassed firefighters, who were still dealing with the fires started the day before and not yet made safe. Despite the mobilisation of every firefighter, and the call-up of practically every able-bodied man in the south-west (including hundreds of timber workers, the Army, farmers and waterside workers), two massive fires developed over subsequent days, one to the north and one to the east of Dwellingup. Under extreme heatwave conditions and gale-force winds, these fires eventually coalesced and, on the evening of 24 January, they took on a life of their own. The townships of Dwellingup, Holyoake and Nanga



Top A Forests Department vehicle, caught by fire in the forestry yard.
Photo - The West Australian

Above Frank Campbell—the officer in charge at Dwellingup in 1961, then aged 27—recalls the fire 45 years later.
Photo - DEC

Right Signalman Ed Renton operating an Army A510 radio at the Dwellingup fire, January 1961.
Photo courtesy of Ed Renton



Brook all burned. Banksiadale, a few kilometres north of Dwellingup, was miraculously unharmed, as the fire veered away at the last moment.

Frank recalls the fateful night: "It was now about 7pm. I remember Bruce [Beggs] taking a small group of men down into the yard to try to save some vehicles and then I didn't see him again. The others had left the office. There was nothing they could do. The

ember storm had arrived and burning brands were falling thickly all around. Houses and buildings started to catch alight, including my own house that was next door to the office. I ripped the front out of my shirt, wet it in a pack spray and wrapped it around my face so that I could breathe and went to try to save my house. It was hopeless. I ran back to the office. It was by then well alight. My car was parked



Above Aerial view of the devastated Dwellingup town site.



Left Forestry firefighter at the Crowea fire.

Below left Boranup Forest in the wake of the Karridale fire.

Photos – The West Australian



at the front and just as I was running to it, Sonny Cave (a forest ranger from Mundaring) appeared from nowhere at my side and ran with me. Sonny stood by me for the rest of the night.

“The front seat of my car was alight, but we put that out and climbed in. It wouldn’t start—the petrol in the carburettor must have vaporised in the heat—but at last it fired and we tore off. I was heading for Alan Hatch’s house, where I hoped my wife and kids might be. As we drove headlong down the main street, a powerline dropped across the bonnet of the car and then swept over the roof. I instinctively ducked, sat up, found I was headed for a shopfront, swerved back onto the road and kept going. At this moment I spotted the Hatch car on the football oval. There, being minded by Nan Hatch like an old mother hen with her chicks, I found my wife and kids.”

It was a time for heroes, and there were many of them. It was also a time for terrible anxieties and stress. Wives were separated from their husbands, parents from their children, men from their families. Gloria Wilmott is the daughter of the legendary forestry overseer Jim Warren, who was away

with his gang firefighting. Gloria, aged 17 at the time, remembers that when the fire hit town her mother was responsible not just for her six children, but also for her elderly parents and the family dog. Mrs Warren never lost her cool: "Mum assembled everyone on the front verandah, and armed us with wet blankets that she had been soaking in the bath. Her idea was to head for the football oval or the hotel, but we had left our run too late. The fire caught us before we even reached the railway line. There was a hollow in the ground in front of Jim Carroll's house, some sort of drain, and we took shelter in it. Mum huddled us together and covered us with the wet blankets, but these dried out as soon as the heat struck them, so she got me up and she and I ran across to Carroll's to re-wet them, carry them back and get in under until they dried out again. We made three or four trips before the tap stopped running. As I ran back and forth I could see that the houses, hedges and parked cars down Banksiadale Road and the forestry office were all burning."

All communications had broken down, and for many hours

communities were isolated from the outside world. Josephine Holland, who became separated from her husband Arthur, went looking for him at the Pinjarra Hospital the next day. "There were rows of men lying on the lawn of the hospital," she recalled, "and I walked up and down looking for Arthur. Eventually I found him, and at first I thought he was dead. But he was just blinded by smoke and ash, and utterly exhausted."

But the long hot summer was not yet over

In mid-February 1961, before the authorities had even started to recover from the Dwellingup catastrophe, a new and vicious lightning storm struck, this time deep in the karri forest. One of these became the Crowea fire, south of Pemberton, and another the Dog Road Fire, south of Shannon River. Although these fires did not affect towns or farmland, they devastated thousands of hectares of beautiful and valuable karri and jarrah forest.

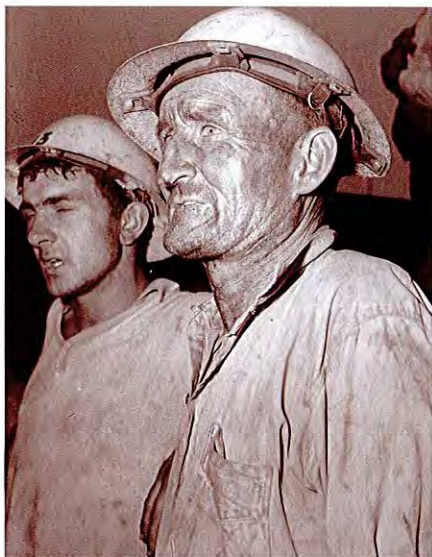
And even then it was not over. In early March yet another searing heatwave struck the south-west.

A number of fires broke out near Margaret River and Augusta. One of these developed into an unstoppable crown fire within Boranup Forest (which had not been burned for more than 40 years), and eventually destroyed the historic township of Karridale. Lee Walker was a young policeman at the time, and had the job of investigating these fires. He recalls: "Friday, March 3 was the day Karridale bore the brunt of the main fire. During the day, residents had fearfully watched the huge clouds of smoke to the north, and as it came closer they could hear the roar of the fire, see the flames and the many spot fires starting up ahead of the main front. White ash would fall, quickly followed by red hot cinders.

"Reaching Karridale, the fire burnt to the ground: Millars Trading Store (also the post office and liquor shop), the fuel depot, six mill houses, the CWA Hall, the Karridale Hall, the hospital, the Anglican Church, and two privately owned houses. Due to timely evacuation, there was no loss of life. Eventually, the fire reached Hamelin Bay, where people sheltered on the beach, after which it turned towards

Right The explosion of the fuel dump at Karridale.

Below Overseer Jimmy Warren and forest guard John Patterson arriving back at headquarters from firefighting.
Photos - *The West Australian*





Left All that remained of a farm homestead after the Karridale fire. Photo - *The West Australian*

Below Dwellingup town today. Photo - *Elisa Skillen/DEC*

Augusta. Luckily Augusta township was protected by an area of light fuels which had been burned not long before.”

Lessons learned

The fires of 1961 were investigated by a Royal Commission. Although the commissioner praised the skill and courage of the firefighters, and acknowledged the unprecedented conditions they faced, he also made numerous recommendations. Among the most important outcomes were improved coordination between government and volunteer firefighters, the use of modern radios and equipment and, most importantly, a new emphasis on fuels management. The Royal Commission was a driving force in stimulating the development of fire behaviour research and the fuel reduction burning program that later took WA to the forefront of world bushfire management.

And what of the fact that not one life was lost while four townships burned and firefighters confronted ferocious crown fires? There are two explanations: first, the forest firefighters of the time were tough, practical and fire-wise. They knew how to look after themselves and their mates and they were well led by experienced overseers and officers. Second, the people in the small forestry and timber towns of the south-west in those days were people who lived in, worked, and understood the Australian bush. They knew about

fire. When the threat reached a certain point, they simply moved out, seeking safe places where they waited out the fire storm. Saving lives took priority over saving possessions. Furthermore, although towns such as Dwellingup were surrounded by forest, the forest did not dominate within the town. In Victoria on Black Saturday in 2009, on the contrary, people were caught in townsites where houses nestled beneath the dense canopy of heavy forest.

To the firefighters and survivors of the fires of 1961 two lessons remain indelible. The first is that attempts to fight a crown fire burning in heavy fuels under bad weather conditions will always fail—the intensity and spot fires

generated make firefighting hopeless. For this reason, the maintenance of an effective fuel reduction burning program is absolutely vital. In the words of Gordon Styles, one of WA’s finest firefighters, and a survivor of the Dwellingup fire: “We were trying to defeat fast-moving fires under hot, windy conditions in heavy fuels. Even with modern equipment this simply cannot be done. If there is a single lesson from the Dwellingup fire I hope will never be forgotten, this is it.”

There is a second lesson: communities in bushfire-prone areas must have a ‘Plan B’—the capacity to move quickly and calmly to safe places well in advance of intense, fast-moving fires. This is especially critical these days as so many people who live in bushfire-prone areas have little bushfire experience.

Will there be another summer to equal that of 1960–61? Hopefully not, but the authorities should never forget the lessons learned that year. One ‘great teaching event’ is enough.



Roger Underwood is a former district and regional manager with the then Western Australian Forests Department, and was a firefighter during the 1960–61 fires.

This article is based on Roger’s new book *Tempered by Fire—stories from the firefighters and survivors of the 1961 Western Australian bushfires*. The book is available from The Bushfire Front by email to yorkgum@westnet.com.au.

See the next edition of *LANDSCOPE* for an overview of how fire management has changed in the 50 years since the Dwellingup fires.

- 46 People in profile: wildlife photographer Jiri Lochman
Most *LANDSCOPE* readers will recognise the stunning photography bearing the Lochman name.
- 52 Western Australia's Ramsar wetlands
Why are 12 WA wetlands recognised as internationally important? And what tools do we have for understanding and managing them?
- 59 Woylies in the Woodland
Visit the new Woodland Reserve in Perth's Whiteman Park to learn about—and see up close—a number of our threatened fauna species.

Regulars

- 3 Contributors and Editor's letter
- 29 Bookmarks
Field guide to sea stingers and other venomous and poisonous marine invertebrates of Western Australia
Wetland habitats: a practical guide to restoration and management
Remote and wild: seeking the unknown Australia
- 30 Feature park
Avon Valley National Park
- 51 Endangered
Coastal sedgelands
- 62 Urban Antics
Mangroves ...

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