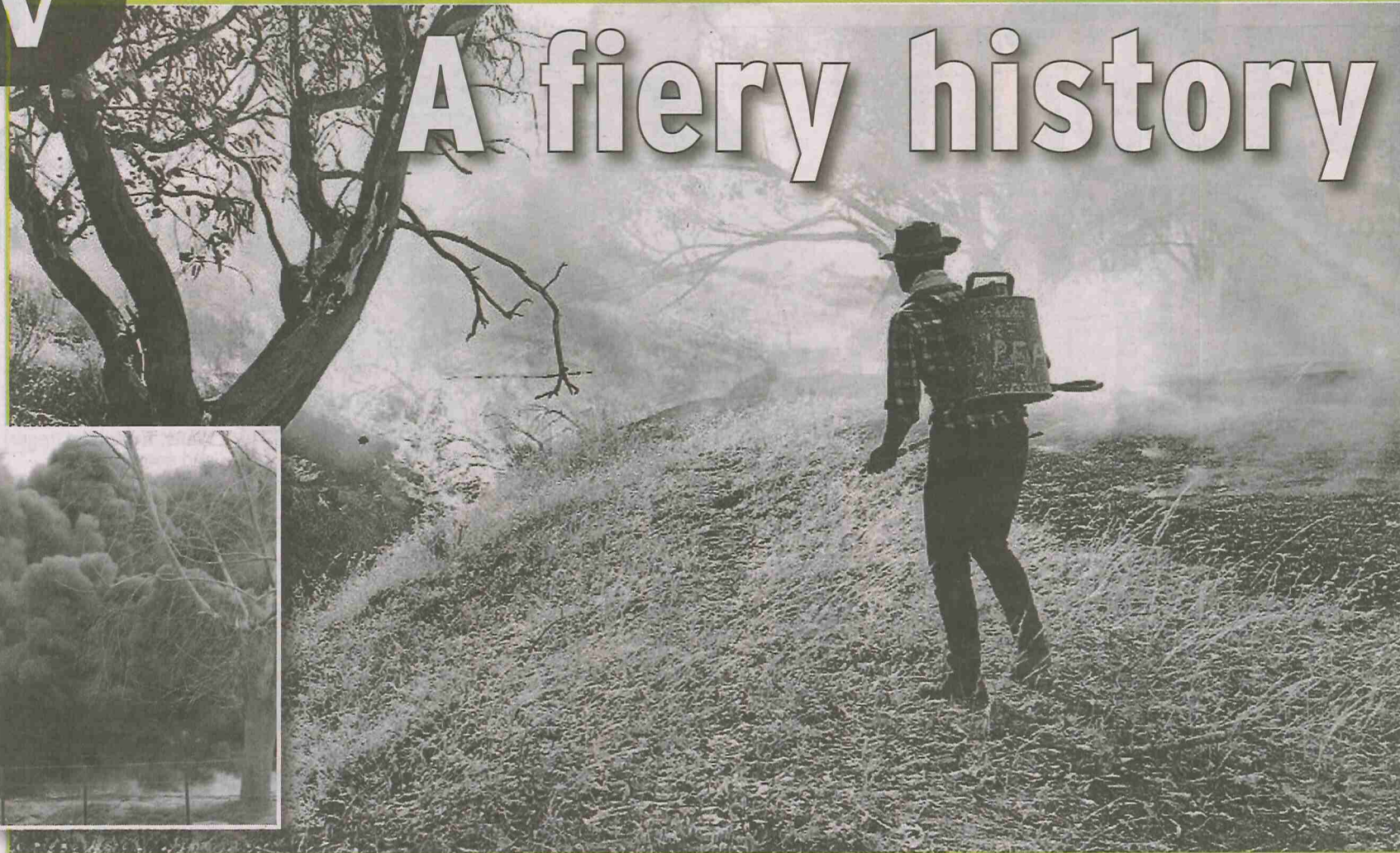


A fiery history

The CSU Regional Archives is extending its opening hours to include the first Saturday of every month. On these days, the archives will be open from 10am to 3pm. The next Saturday opening will occur on February 2. This trial initiative has been put in place to cater for those researchers who are unable to visit the archives on weekdays during normal business hours. It is hoped that enough researchers and visitors will avail themselves of this service to warrant it becoming a permanent occurrence.



at the
archives

Wayne Doubleday



what you need to know

The CSU Regional Archives are open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm. Located in the Blakemore Building on South Campus of the university, access can be gained via College Avenue or Hely Avenue. Members of the public are welcome to visit the search room, where professional archival staff can assist with inquiries. For those people unable to visit the archives in person, staff can provide a research service for straight-forward inquiries for a fee of \$55 per hour including copying and postage. For further information, phone 02 6925 3666, email archive@csu.edu.au, or visit our website at www.csu.edu.au/research/archives for a full listing of holdings and more detailed information.



The danger and heartbreak of bushfires has been at the forefront of everyone's mind in recent weeks.

We've all seen just how much effort, equipment and time it takes to even attempt to stop such fires.

The following is from a copy of a letter held at the CSU Regional Archives in the Davidson Family Collection. This letter was written by WJ McKinney of "Nangus", Gundagai to his Aunt, Mrs McGaw of Marinella, Manly on January 2, 1902. McKinney and his neighbours had just experienced a huge bushfire, which was later named "The Wantabadgery Fire". It reportedly broke out on Wantabadgery Station and spread to burn out a huge amount of land between Junee and Gundagai, killing a number of people, leaving some homeless, and others losing much of their crops and livestock.

In 1902, equipped bushfire brigades in our district were still a few years away. After the massive bushfires all over NSW in the summer of 1904-05, farmers and graziers began to organise into dedicated brigades, purchasing water carts and pumps to help them prevent such widespread damage and death.

"DEAR Aunt, I duly received your letter of 29 ult. for which I thank you.

You were just a little previous in congratulating me on my escape from fires, as you would see from Possum's letter and the papers. However, it might have been worse, and I am very thankful to have got off so lightly. Had the rain not come when it did, and the wind kept in the west for another half hour, nothing could have saved it reaching Gundagai.

As it is, we will have only from 5000 to 6000 sheep to sell this year, instead of from 7000 to 8000. When these and the sale cattle are sold, I think we shall have plenty of grass to pull through with all the others. As Effie gave all the details in her letter to her mother, which she asked to be sent on to you to read, I need not go into particulars again.

I sent a wire to Joe, which I asked him to repeat to Roslyn Hall, and I knew he would send word to you, but it appears he had gone to "Kooba". Mr Robinson thinks that the storm was blowing at least 50 miles an hour, so you can guess we hadn't time to move many stock.

He says he has never seen a day like it since he came here. To let you know how the fire jumped, I

may tell you that there is a tree burning in the middle of a big dam, and there was no other fire within 200 yards of it, and Peter Daly's house got alight three times, and no grass to burn within 100 yards of it.

The Billabong creek saved 20 or 30 people from being roasted alive, and even then, one man from "Nangus" got his coat and waistcoat burned off him when standing in the water, in the middle of the creek. Billabong Jenkins has lost fencing, all his wheat, all his grass, and a lot of sheep and horses. "Wantabadgery" has lost all grass and a lot of sheep; Beveridge has lost all his grass but 1000 acres, and a great many sheep and his son's house at "Eringoara".

He had about 25,000 sheep before the fire. "Oura" has lost all grass I hear, and "Eunonyhareenyha" lost heavily. The fire jumped the river in three places and went 30 miles back on "Borambola".

One man was burned to death there, and Gunn, the manager, who used to be on "Yalgogrini", was badly burned, and has, I hear, since died. I cannot understand how no one got killed on "Nangus".

There were several very narrow escapes. When it was blowing hardest, I tried to go home along the Wagga road, but I was caught opposite a wheat crop, and had to turn back, which I had a great job to do.

The wind was blowing tongues of flame from the burning house till all the grass to the west was burned, and then he picked up a bucket of water and dragged the old woman over to the fence, where they stayed all night. The clothes they had on were all burned in holes, and they had to keep throwing water on each other to keep from getting roasted. We will lose about 2500 sheep I think, and a lot of fencing.

Our loss will probably run into £2000, but I consider we were very lucky to save any grass or sheep at all. Old Larkins, a "Nangus" boundary rider, lost house, furniture, all his fowls, a cat, a dog, and two horses, besides his spring cart and buggy; in fact he and the old woman had nothing but the clothes they stood up in when I rode out there on Sunday morning.

He is 74 and his wife is 72, and they stayed in the burning house till all the grass to the west was burned, and then he picked up a bucket of water and dragged the old woman over to the fence, where they stayed all night. The clothes they had on were all burned in holes, and they had to keep throwing water on each other to keep from getting roasted. We will lose about 2500 sheep I think, and a lot of fencing.

Dozens of selectors were burned clean out, houses and all.

They were just getting their wheat off, and it is nearly all gone. There won't be 50 bags of wheat in the district. Old Jenkins went to bed and cried all day I hear. I have found out there is an advantage to have selectors all around, instead of the other way about, as we could never have made the fires safe from burning timber without their help.

We have 200 acres of wheat land rented to a man, and he was burned right out, getting his

moustache burned off, and other serious burns.

If I had had one I bet it would have been burned off too. We can't ask this man for rent this year I guess. The only consolation we have got, is that we have got a lot of yankee grubbing done in quick time.

The "Wantabadgery" people are trying to hush their losses up I think, as they say they only lost about 100 sheep, but I heard that they lost 30,000 instead. We had a nice shower of rain on Monday, and it put out a lot of the timber that is still burning.

I think things are pretty safe now, and I am not sorry, as I don't want any more of it just now. I thought for a time that house and everything must go, but the little sprinkle of rain saved us.

However, we might live for 50 years and not see such a day again. I have heard of fires that could travel as fast as a horse could gallop, but I never saw one before. I am quite sure that, at times, it went at the rate of 30 miles an hour, and it would take a good horse to do that. I travelled six miles up the river, while I was galloping two miles through Billabong country.

Not much chance of getting sheep out of the way there. Luckily they were nearly all on their camps, which were bare, or a great many more would have burned. Most of those we lost were weaners, and of the course they were all over the paddock. I think that is enough about the fire, so I will give it a spell.

I am very glad you like the little booklet, and thank you for forwarding one on to NZ. I sent one, or rather Possum sent one, to Mrs Molyneux weeks ago, and they should have it by this time.

We got through some 90 of them. I will bring you one down when we come as you wish. I don't know when we will be in Sydney now, as I will have to see things fixed up a bit before I leave.

Effie is very well now and does not care to leave until I go, but I hope to get away before the end of the month. It will be a bit safer then.

Possum drove out with me to Larkin's, and took clothes, eatables, and blankets. In fact, she has been better and more sprightly since the fire than she was before it. She made all sorts of preparations here for it - wet blankets for the windows, buckets of water ready, etc and looked after letting all the animals go.

She had only a boy, and an old man and Bridgit here, and the old man can hardly hobble about. He looks after giving out the rations and the store. The telephone has been going in great style during the last week. All that is left of the one at Larkin's is the big magnets.

I think the *Herald* gives a very mild report of the fire indeed, and if one of their reporters had been in the thick of it, he would have had a different story to tell. Well, I have to write some more letters, and have only a short time to do it in, so I will stop. I want to get some trucks ordered, as we shall have to get some of the sheep away as soon as possible.

With love from Effie and self, I remain your affect. nephew, WJ McKinney."

- Compiled by Jillian Kohlhagen