

DEVASTATING BUSHFIRES OF 1918.

A Central-West Holocaust.

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The Willoughby and Saltern Creek Fires.

Sad and Tragic Deaths of Messrs. Jones, Burgess, Heck, Holmes, Gilchrist, Knewiten and Thorpe.

A Sad Week.

The year 1918 will be remembered as a tragic year, owing to the disastrous bushfires which swept over various portions of the State, and "The Western Champion" of November 2nd of that year contains full accounts of the great fires which swept over the country from Charleville, south to the border, north through Tambo district, even extending to Alpha, and the great destruction of grass, fencing, and some stock in the Blackall region. The previous week "down the river" towards Jundah there were sweeping fires in the district of Longreach, and the lesser conflagrations in the desert areas, but happily without any stated loss of life. Unhappily, in the week under review, the disastrous and tragic fires on Willoughby and Saltern Creek were recorded, and not only was extensive property reported but loss of life and severe burnings sustained by others. To quote from our

In last issue we reported a fire which traversed a small portion of Mayfield, a corner of Dunblane, and destroyed the whole of the reserve and a portion of the race-course, situated on the north side of the town. But the damage was trivial compared with the loss of life it is our duty to report this week. It is well-known that as a result of the excellent seasons in the earlier months of the year the grass grew luxuriantly, and it was impossible for stock to eat it down. In some of the paddocks it was over a man's head—long stretches of plain appeared like fields of ripened corn. It was anticipated that the practically dry period of six months would terminate in heavy thunderstorms, and with the grass in its dry state fears were expressed on all sides that an anxious time was ahead on account of probable lightning. And so it turned out. Many fires have been caused by lightning within the past week or so. A Longreach visitor mentioned that he and

others observed three distinct flashes strike the earth in the direction of Whitehill and three volumes of smoke simultaneously springing up, reminding one of shell fire. Subsequent reports stated that Mr. H. White was burnt out, and that all the adjacent country had suffered. Still, no loss of life was reported.

Early on Wednesday morning it was rumored that a serious fire had been raging on Willoughby and that several men were cut off and burnt. The reports gained in intensity as the morning wore on, and although there was some exaggeration the reports were substantially correct. It was stated that Mr. Arthur Burgess and Mr. Arthur Hock had been so badly burnt that recovery was hopeless, and that Mr. P. J. Thorpe (well-known locally as 'Mick') and another whose name was not then known, but now stated to be Mr. Richmond, overseer at Rodney

Downs, were seriously burned. Phone messages from Willoughby confirmed this, and Mr. L. L. Pearson went out in his car to assist in bringing in the sufferers. On the way out he met Mr. Thos. Alexander with Mr. McDougall, who were driving Messrs. Burgess and Hock into town. The men were immediately taken to the hospital. Hock appeared to be in a particularly bad way; his legs were partially drawn up and in lifting him McDougall says the flesh seemed to slip away. Hock, who is 35 years of age, single, and whose mother resides at 'Glenvale,' Too-woomba, succumbed at 3.30 a.m.

woomba, succumbed at 3.30 a.m. Burgess was more cheerful and conversed with Messrs. Pearson and Carson, and it came as a great shock when it was learned he had died at 4 a.m. He was probably injured internally. Mr. Arthur Percival Burgess, aged 42, single, was the son of Mr. and Mrs. John Burgess who had been resident in the Central district from its earliest days, but of late they had settled down quietly in Barcaldine. Mr. Thos Alexander gave Actg-Sergt. Regan a brief outline of the mishap. He said a party went out to extinguish a fire which was burning on Bumble and extending to the Blackboy. There were eight or ten in the party, including Mr. Richmond, of Rodney Downs. After fighting the fire for some time another fire was observed some distance away, and Burgess, Hock, Richmond and another whose name was not then known, went round the fire towards the new outbreak. It was stated that Burgess and Hock were the only ones on horseback and they went ahead. After circling the fire the wind changed and blew the fire directly towards the two men, who were riding parallel to a fence. The fire was fierce, due to the long dry grass and both men were overwhelmed. Subsequently the men were searched for. Hock was the first found; he was naked, excepting for his boots, which were burnt and hard; further along was Burgess, also naked, with the exception of his boots and a bit of singlet round his neck. He said he had dragged off the burning garments and believed he would have

ments and believed he would have escaped had not his horse jumped the fence and fell, throwing him. Another man named Bargoed was reported missing. The funerals of Messrs. Burgess and Hock took place on Wednesday afternoon, the Rev. Father Bucas officiating at both. Feasts were entertained for the safety of Messrs. J. Y. Shannon and F. J. Richmond, manager and overseer of Rodney Downs respectively, but on Thursday afternoon, in reply to inquiries, Mr. Shannon stated that he and Mr. Richmond, although they had a trying time, were quite safe. Mr. Richmond, especially, had a very close call and only escaped with difficulty from a very tight corner. Mr. Richmond was with the late Messrs. Burgess and Hock, and gal-

loped through the flames, and also a small mob of sheep—about 50— and thus got away. Mr. Shannon was on the other side of the fire trying to get sheep away, and he is of opinion that Mr. Burgess would have succeeded in getting away only his horse shied or took fright, apparently at the mob of sheep mentioned before and he was thrown on to the fence and could not recover before the flames overtook him. Mr. Shannon said the fire travelled so fast that the men had no chance to escape. Mr. Burgess was following Mr. Richmond, but Mr. Hock, who was some distance behind Burgess, had not a chance. The whole mob of sheep was burnt where they stood, and Mr. Shannon said that Messrs. Hock's and Burgess' horses were pitiful to behold. The whole skin was practically burnt off each, the

was practically burnt off each, the tails were almost incinerated right off, the ears were burnt off, while one's eyes were blinded. The poor animals could not possibly live a day. Even the hair in the saddles on the horses' backs was burnt. Mr. Shannon endorsed the opinion that the losses must have been exceptionally heavy on Saltern, and it was not to be wondered at when those present saw the magnitude, intensity, and rapidity of the fire.

The Saltern Creek Disaster.

Almost overlapping the news from Willoughby came reports of a disaster at Saltern Creek, in which Mr. A. K. Jones, the manager of the station, and probably others, had lost their lives, while several were supposed to be burnt more or less seriously. The fire apparently was raging strongly in the north-west and many were the anxious enquiries made. The report regarding the death of Mr. Jones was contradicted, then re-affirmed; it appears it was 'phoned at mid-day that Mr. Jones was badly burnt, but alive, for the purpose of breaking the news gently to someone in town, but at the same time Messrs. Meacham & Leyland were making a coffin. At length the sad news could be no longer withheld. Early in the afternoon it was reported that Thorpe had succumbed to his severe burns, but happily Rumor was a lying jade this time; still the fire had claimed another victim, it subsequently transpired, in Harry Knowiton, a comparative stranger in this district and who was supposed to hail from Sydney. Constable Taylor and Dr. Cook and

Constable Taylor and Dr. Cook and the Matron of the Victoria Hospital left at about noon, and later available cars were pressed into the service as the flames were rapidly approaching the woolshed, fed by whirleys and a breeze. Mr. D. Stibbards drove a party out in his car, and returned in the evening for supplies for the men. He went out again and returned during the night. There had been showers in patches which had apparently put a damper on the fire. Messrs. J. and Gordon Meacham and A. A. Dyer went to Saltern Creek at 8 p.m. with the wooden coffins, returning at 2 a.m. with the corpses, which were first taken to the hospital and subsequently placed in St. Peter's Church of England to await interment. The funerals took place at 11 a.m. on Thursday, the Rev. W. J. Park officiating.

The cars which had gone returned to town almost altogether just after 6 p.m., and were driven to the hospital. Subsequently, when

interviewed, Constable Taylor said he went out to Saltern Creek at about noon, Mr. L. N. E. Munro driving the Matron of the hospital (Miss Green), Mr. Carson and himself. Upon arriving at the homestead, they were instructed to go to the woolshed, five miles further on. The fire from that distance appeared very fierce, and it was noticed the grass was very tall; the weather was threatening and the wind was cyclonic. At the shed was Mr. J. R. Rigby's car, which had taken out Dr. Cook and Phil Graham, from

Dr. Cook and Phil Graham, from Mr. Pearson's office. Leaving the Matron at the woolshed, Mr. Matthews, overseer of Saltern Creek, piloted the doctor and the constable in the direction of the fire. They had gone about twelve miles when they met Frank Hall who was conveying in his car three men — Harry Knowiton (dead), S. J. Thorpe (known as 'Mick') and Roy Holmes, son of Mr. W. R. Holmes, Stock Inspector, badly burned. A station buggy followed, driven by Mr. Kerrigan, containing the dead body of Mr. Jones and Mr. Gilchrist, who was badly burned. The party returned to the station where everything possible was done for the injured men. The fire was burning strongly towards the woolshed road, fanned by a strong breeze, and it was not safe to traverse it until the grass had been burnt back from the road. In reply to inquiries Mr. Matthews informed the constable that he found the men in Bumble paddock in Bumble Creek. Mr. Jones was then dead, and the other three were in a bad condition. He found them at 11 a.m. on Tuesday. Knowiton succumbed shortly after having been found, and Mr. Matthews, at the time, had very little hopes for the others, but he lost no time in communicating with Barcaldine. Large numbers of dead sheep were observed.

Mr. F. E. Hall, the well-known car proprietor, returned to town from Saltern Creek on Wednesday night, after having been there since the previous day. It appears Mr. Hall was engaged and took Mr. Jones out to Saltern Creek

Mr. Jones out to Saltern Creek on Tuesday. He drove Mr. Jones and a party of men to No. 11 here, about six miles from Saltern woolshed, and there he was instructed to remain. Mr. Jones, with a party of men, left the bore at about 5 p.m., taking with them a waggonette, plenty of water, and ample provisions. Mick Thorpe, it is understood, was driving the vehicle, when it is supposed it struck a stump and they had an accident. In the meantime the fire had worked round them apparently, wedging the men in a corner. Mr. Jones previously instructed a couple of men, who were with them, to go ahead of the fire and get the sheep away. About 8.45 p.m. Mr. Hall became anxious and he coo-ed. He was answered by these two men, and on being asked if they had seen Mr. Jones they replied that the last they saw of them they were surrounded by fire. About 11 p.m. they again said they had seen nothing further of Mr. Jones. A fire then started to burn up on the left and the two men left to beat it out, which they did by daylight on Wednesday. Mr. Hall went to the station and reported the matter to Mr. Matthews, who immediately organised a search party and discovered Mr. Jones about 10 a.m. on Wednesday morning. The body of Mr. Jones was found lying face downwards. There was not a stitch of

clothes on him. Another man Knowlton was found lying alongside Mr. Jones, but alive. He said to his rescuers, 'All right,

said to his rescuers, 'All right, mates, I'll be all right when I get to the hospital.' They lifted him up to place him in a car and he immediately succumbed. This man was frightfully burned. Nothing was left on him; even the flannel was burnt. All he had on was the neckband of his shirt, his belt and boots. When Mr. Hall left the station on Wednesday night he said the fire had nearly reached the woolshed. There appeared to be 30 fires burning on Saltern at the same time and incinerated stock were lying all over the burnt country, presenting a pitiful sight. There were many speculations as to the probable losses of stock on Saltern, and it was authoritatively stated on Thursday that these will approach 50,000.

Many of the fire-fighters returned to town on Thursday morning and they state the fire was fairly well got under when the rain started—a small but brisk shower. The fire had come up to the yards near the homestead, and some good work was put in there.

The country south-west of Barcaldine appeared to be blazing away on Wednesday night. A small portion of Dunraven was burned, but no loss of stock was reported.

Rumors were rife on Thursday that five men were missing on Leichhardt, but Mr. T. B. Neville, the manager, subsequently advised that all the men had turned up safely. A fire on Leichhardt burned out some 3000 acres, but there was a very large fire on Willoughby on Wednesday when a good deal of country was swept. There was also a terrific fire on

There was also a terrific fire on Ewendale (Rodney country) on Wednesday night, and it took a number of men nearly all night before the flames were overcome. Rodney lost 100 sheep. The fire having to traverse country previously burnt saved Rodney to a large extent.

It is a strange coincidence that the Christian name of three of the four men who received fatal injuries in the fire was Arthur.

The Chairman of the Barcaldine Shire Council, on behalf of the citizens of Barcaldine, expressed the deep sympathy of the community with the sufferers and their relatives through the disastrous fires on Willoughby and Saltern Creek, more especially having regard to the fatalities and those who were still suffering from burns.

In the subsequent issue of "The Western Champion"—Nov. 9th—it was reported that Harold Gilchrist, aged 41 years, and William Roy Holmes, aged 17 years, both of whom had been seriously burned in the Saltern Creek fire, had succumbed. The funerals took place the same day. At this time Mr. Thorpe, who had been in a low condition ever since his admission to the hospital, was doing all right with every hope of recovery. In the issue of Nov. 16th, however, it is reported that Mr. Thorpe passed away on the previous Saturday morning, after lingering nearly a fortnight from the severe burns he had sustained. The late Mr. Thorpe was aged 36 years at the time of his death. The Rev. J. A. Laurie conducted the last sad rites.

With the passing of Mr. Thorpe,

With the passing of Mr. Thorpe, that made the fifth death as a result of the Saltern Creek fire, in addition to the two deaths at Willoughby. Truly a sad record.