

The background image is a dark, atmospheric photograph of a forest. A large, textured tree trunk is the central focus, extending vertically. To the right, a tree with yellowish-green foliage is visible, suggesting a fire-affected area. The overall tone is somber and contemplative.

THE BEECHWORTH-MUDGEONGA FIRE **20**

# 20 THE BEECHWORTH–MUDGEONGA FIRE

## SUE AND JOHN WILSON

At about midnight on Saturday 7 February 2009 Sue and John Wilson died in the family home John had built at 1133 Myrtleford–Yackandah Road, Mudgegonga. Sue, 47, and John, 51, are survived by their two daughters, Grace and Samantha Wilson.

John Wilson, a self-employed builder, had built the family's brick home on a half-hectare block of land on the western side of the Myrtleford–Yackandah Road about 18 years ago. Grace Wilson stated:

Approximately one hundred metres behind the house block ran the Barwidgee Creek. From the creek the land went up into steep bushland. I'd doubt if there would be much water flowing in the creek at this time of year. Between the creek and the house block was open grass paddock area which was owned by uncle Clary. Opposite from the house on the eastern side, was open grass paddock which then rose up into steep bushland. The house was about 1.5 km from the intersection of Stanley Road. The house block had a really well maintained garden with a mixture of various trees and shrubs. We also had an above ground pool in the backyard. The house was positioned roughly in the middle of the block ...

Late in the afternoon of 7 February the Wilsons and their neighbours, Patricia and Lindsay Easterbrook, could smell smoke and became aware of fire in their area. Throughout the evening and late into the night a number of people—family, friends, neighbours and firefighters—telephoned and visited the Wilsons, warning of a fire threat to the area. At 7.30 pm the captain of the Mudgegonga CFA brigade stopped at the Wilson house to warn them of the approaching fire and found Mr Wilson filling a petrol pump. Mr Wilson was aware of the fire threat and appeared calm. CFA firefighters called in to the Wilson property three times during the evening, at one stage helping Mr Wilson get one of the petrol pumps started.

The last visit by firefighters to the Wilson property occurred at 11.30 pm, when two members of the Hancock Victorian Plantations fire crew, James Bowden and Conrad King, called in. Mr Bowden had known Mr Wilson for 25 years and had called in after fighting fires in the Mudgegonga area; he knew that there were fires about 2 kilometres from the Wilsons' property. The Wilsons were inside the house and appeared calm. Mr Bowden advised them to leave, to which Mr Wilson responded, 'Jimbo, I've got the big pump on the pool, don't worry'.

Daughter Grace did not recall hearing of any formal fire plan and thought that her parents were going to leave. It is evident that throughout the evening Mr Wilson was making preparations, and he told various people he spoke with that he was planning to stay and defend. He had connected fire hoses and prepared petrol pumps, one to draw water from the creek and one to draw water from the pool, although it appears that there were some problems with access to water. One of the pumps was faulty and was being fixed as late as 10.15 pm. There was no water in the house tank and little, if any, water in the creek. It seems that the main water source being relied on for firefighting purposes was the water in the swimming pool.

Mrs Wilson told her daughter in a phone call at some time between 9.00 and 9.30 pm that she was getting a few things together. Vincent Muraca called his friend Mr Wilson at about 10.15 pm; he recalled that Mr Wilson was preparing to stay and defend and seemed confident. At about 11.00 pm Mrs Wilson's uncle, Clarence Murray, called in with his wife. Mr Murray recalled that throughout their conversation he did not hear the Wilsons commit to any course of action—that is, whether they were going to stay or leave—although they did not say they would leave.

Neighbours Pat and Lindsay Easterbrook managed to successfully defend their house. Mr Easterbrook recounted:

At about 11.30 or so it spotted and we had a huge fire over the back here behind us. At about five to 12 we noticed finally the wind change. It [the fire] crested over the top of these hills here ... As it crested there this hillside exploded. Within 30 seconds, I would say, of coming over the top of that hill it came right through here at about 100 miles an hour. The whole—everything was on fire at once, the whole, almost 360 degrees ... We couldn't, we didn't expect the ferocity of it.

Mr and Mrs Wilson's bodies were found on 8 February in the remains of their home. Mr Wilson was outside, on the verandah near the back door, and Mrs Wilson inside, near where the bathroom had been.

The post-mortem reports record the deaths of Sue and John Wilson as resulting from the effects of fire.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Exhibit 292 – Interactive Presentation – INTMEN 001816 (EXH.292.0001); Armstrong T7648:12–T7648:13; Easterbrook T7656:18–T7656:23, T7657:5–T7657:16, T7657:26–T7657:27; Hollowood T7647:28–T7675:16