

PLOD ESSAY: Mine Whistle; did it blow on that fateful day?

As the headline in this week's (09/04/2013) *Star* says, "Whistle is Back!" It had been off-line for a few months while the fellows at the State Coal Mine figured out what was wrong with it and once they did that, scrounged up the small part needed to fix the valve, and then located someone brave enough to climb up the nine-metre-high tower and fix it. But it's fixed now at last and letting us all know how happy it is to be fixed with brighter notes than ever. I just heard it while I was picking the last of the tomatoes in the garden, and I checked my watch. Spot on. Midday. But, often in the past my watch and the sound of the whistle have not coincided.

"Never mind," says Irene Williams. "It's the whistle that will be right. When the whistle blows, it's midday in Wonthaggi."

John Danks in Melbourne manufactured the original whistle in 1913. It was a three-chambered brass whistle, which combined a blend of three notes. It was built to withstand the 3000 pounds of superheated steam it took make the whistle loud enough to wake up the day-shift miners, and everybody else, at 6:00 am. It was the same design as the funnel whistle used on the *Titanic*. It was mounted on the powerhouse. A saucer shaped deflector was added to it during World War II to make it audible as far as Kongwak, Tarwin Lower and Eagles Nest.

Shortly after the Powerhouse began generating power for the State Coal Mine in 1912, the whistle began to blow. The *Powlett Express* in April 1914 listed seventeen different whistles all signalling different Times of Day, No Work and Fire. But that was reduced to ten times a day from 6:00 am to 8:30 pm. These whistles regulated the lives of 'miners, shop keepers, school children, and housewives alike.'

Everyone knows Joe Chambers' Mine Whistle Song:

*You old dream breaker,
You old power-house shaker
You old day-shift waker,
Blow blow – Blow – Blow!*

In the *Memory of Wonthaggi* Book, there are many references to the whistle and how it affected the lives of the people:

Joe Chambers said, "I remember when I was a kid up at three-acre blocks, the mine whistle would wake me up in the morning and after that first long blast, I would listen and if two more blasts came, it meant it was time to get up and milk the cows. If it was three blasts, that meant it was six o'clock and I could turn back and go to sleep."

Alec Mullen remembered pulling the lever to blow that whistle: "The whistle was situated about sixty feet up in the Power station" and when it blew it "stirred the feathers and dust up. The dust used to be shaken off the roof rafters and the girders and the birds that were roosting there used to flutter and fly around making a bit of noise. A group of kookaburras roosted up there the whole year round. Now I think they were the only ones in Wonthaggi that had a laugh at the six o'clock whistle."

Anne Birt Hill remembered, "It was always great hearing the mine whistle letting us know the time of day, especially at school."

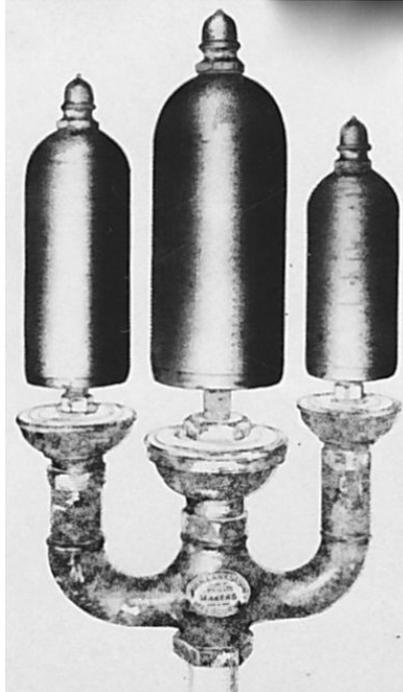
Pat Colbert Andrighetto said, "We all took the whistle each day for granted. The only time we didn't like hearing it was when it would blow continuously. That was the signal that there was some sort of disaster at the mine, such as a cave in or an explosion."

Nell Sleeman, who is now 96 years old, remembers that when she was in secondary school they stopped sounding the whistle for disasters. "It was upsetting people such a lot. In the early days it went off when there was an accident and everybody would go to the mine. It was so upsetting for everybody that they had to cut it out in the end."

The thing is, when you ask people if they remember the 1937 20-Shaft Disaster, so many tell you it was the mine whistle that alerted them to what was happening.

For instance, Fred Brown said, "I was nine years old the day 20-Shaft blew up and I recall the State Mine whistle blowing continuously which meant that a bad accident had occurred."

Joyce Baxter said, "Amidst the sounds of the mine whistle blowing and the fire bell ringing, Mr



Nicholls, our headmaster of the high school, entered the Form 3 classroom. After speaking briefly to our teacher, he asked three boys to accompany him to his office. A hush fell over the classroom, all of us wondering what trouble the boys were in.”

For all her 96 years, Nell Sleeman remembers the day the mine blew up very well. This is because it was the beginning of the most extraordinary days of her life. She was working as a telephonist at the Post Office Exchange in Wonthaggi. She was on day shift “...and a funny thing. We heard a sort of ‘boof’ sound, a muffled sound. Not loud, but enough to make us look out the window. There we saw a cloud of smoke, a mushroomy kind of a cloud. The next minute the damned Exchange went cranky because the Mine rang the General Manager and then he had to ring the Union Office and the Union had to get through to Head Office in Sydney.

“Nobody seemed to know what had really happened. They didn’t realise at first that there were any men down there. There was a strike going on, you see, and all the men were in the Union Theatre having a meeting. The mine had been closed for two weeks.

“No, the whistle wasn’t blowing. They had stopped that years earlier. Besides with the men on strike they never blew the whistle, anyway. So it took a while for the extent of disaster to become known, to realise thirteen men had been down the mine and that they were still down there. The fire bells sounded and there was rushing around, but no whistle and it didn’t happen all at once.

“We never worked so hard in all our lives at the Exchange. We were flat out. We had to put calls through to the Melbourne papers to alert them about the situation and then all the newspaper men flew into Wonthaggi and landed their little planes on the golf course.

“I’ll never forget as long as I live the way the papers descended on us. And they all wanted to phone their stories in at once. There was a three-hour delay on the Melbourne calls, it was that busy. We told the newspapermen they had to wait their turn. No good giving preference to one over the other.

“Then they began to find the bodies and the funerals started. We were flat out. Goodness, the funerals! They would still be coming around the corner by the post office headed for the cemetery while the first ones were already at the cemetery gates. We watched it all, got the telegrams, put calls through. We knew everything.”

It’s possible to trust Nell’s memory of those days over those of a school child. She was older, and, because it was such an emergency, she was absolutely alert throughout the days of the disaster. If you study the story by Joyce Baxter, you can see a flaw in her narrative. If the whistle were blowing along with the fire bells ringing, the kids in the classroom would have known something awful was happening at the mine. But, when the three boys were taken out of class by the headmaster, their classmates thought they were in some kind of trouble for being naughty, not connecting the incident to the sounds that should have been alarming them. Maybe there were no sounds.

Sam Gatto, a serious researcher, has read through all the newspaper reports – local as well as the *Age*, *Herald* and *Argus* – and come to the following conclusions:

“Although some old residents say that the Mine whistle ‘blew and blew’ to announce the 20 Shaft mine disaster in 1937, others are adamant that it did not blow. After much research, I am convinced that the whistle did not blow.

“The State Mine authorities had decided that the whistle would no longer announce that there had been an accident in the mines in order to avoid the anxiety and panic the whistle had caused when this had been the practice in the early years. By regulation the Mine whistle did not blow during holidays and strikes. No news report either local or metropolitan makes any mention at all of the whistle blowing. If it had blown, I’m sure that the reporters would have highlighted the fact to add drama to their reports. Simon Longstaff makes no mention of the whistle blowing in his account of the disaster and its aftermath.

“The Mine whistle, by 1937 an almost mythical institution in Wonthaggi, was such an important part of the town’s life, with its regular life-regulating whistles, that people who are convinced it blew find it inconceivable such a dramatic event in Wonthaggi’s life could happen without the whistle playing its part.”

While this may not be a conclusive argument for many, one thing cannot be denied. The mine whistle is a mythical institution in Wonthaggi. Where it sits now on its tower near the Railway Station Museum designed to look like a mine poppet head looking past the whalebones up McBride Avenue towards Whishart Reserve, it is a monument to our history – our proud history –and we are glad to have it back.

- c. landon