

PLOD ESSAY: Explosion

At nine o'clock on Monday mornings a group of people meet with Terri Allen in the Wonthaggi Wetlands to collect seeds. As they go about their business collecting and sorting, they begin to tell stories about the past. One particularly good storyteller is Bill Hender who, in 1938 when he was just a lad, came to Kilcunda with his family so his Dad could work in the mines there. Bill can talk non-stop about Kilcunda and the things that happened there in a most interesting and entertaining way. Terri loves these stories and encourages them. She thought she had heard just about everything, but one day, Bill told of an incident that she had never heard of:

According to Bill a couple of tourists, a young fellow and his girl, went for a stroll along the foreshore, down below the railway tracks. Unbeknownst to them, they wandered onto the property of the Victorian Coal Mining Company. The fellow was carrying a gun, as one did in case a rabbit showed its head. As they were walking along, the young fellow fired off a random shot. The shot hit the coal mining company's powder magazine where gelignite was stored.

Bill reckoned the explosion would have been heard in Wonthaggi. It was powerful enough so that the boy was blown one way and the girl was blown the other, right over the cliff top into the surf below. He believes there was not much left of the couple but skin and bone.

Bill knew his story was true but he wasn't sure exactly when it happened. Sometime in the early 30s, he thought before his family got to Kilcunda. Terri was amazed she had never heard this story and asked Nola Thorpe, who has been working on a database for the Historical Society Newspaper Collection, to verify it. Nola, a trained librarian, typed the word *explosion* in her computer and several articles came up along with the one she wanted. Bill's story was in the first issue for 1938 of the *The Sentinel*. So, it was definitely true! Bill must have remembered it so clearly because it happened just before he and his family arrived in Kilcunda, thus it was still the talk of the town. Of course, a young fellow's imagination would run wild to hear such a tale.

In *The Sentinel*, it says Edward Hayman, 17 years, of Spotswood, was blown 92 ft away and Miss Ruby Finch, 26 years, was blown over the cliff-top 150 ft away."

The article, written two weeks after the event, which took place on December 20, was mostly focussed on attempts to retrieve Miss Finch's remains, which were unsuccessful not withstanding the bravery Mr Duncan McNair who "fastened a rope around his waist and

entered the boiling surf," ignoring his brother's warning that his actions were madness.

"The surf was boiling and beds of seaweed that could drag a man down like a bubble lie under the surface. If you could only have seen them waist high in the boiling surf, I guarantee you would never forget it," said Duncan's brother.

Although men kept watch and made many attempts, the body was not recovered until it washed up on the beach at Kilcunda several days later, on December 31. The article ends with the burial of young Mr Hayman after which, "the sad little party climbed into the only car present and disappeared down the long, dusty road."

The article explained that the magazine had contained 600 lbs of gelignite, but, in the long, two-column article, there was only one sentence about the explosion itself saying it was "second only to the heart-rending disaster at No.20 Shaft three years earlier". There were no questions about how the magazine containing so much explosive was so accessible and vulnerable to such an accident. No comment about Mr Hayman being foolish in the way he was handling his gun, nor did it query the safety precautions of the mine. There would, it said, be an inquest, but the forgone assumption in the article seemed to be that it was an unfortunate no-fault accident.

In a mining area, the use of explosives is part of life. In Wonthaggi, miners handled gelignite everyday of their working lives. At the State Mine, each shaft had a magazine containing explosives on hand. Usually it was built behind bunkers so that if it did explode, the blast would go up instead of out. The Victoria Mining Company magazine was behind some mounded earth, which is most likely why Mr Hayward didn't see it when he was waving his gun about, but it wasn't enough to protect the hapless couple.

Each morning on their way into the mine, the men would stop off at the magazine and pick up the amount of "gellie" they felt they needed for the day. There was a storeman on hand to keep record of how much was handed out (each packet had 26 sticks in it and no man got more than two packets) and to mark the tally against each miner's wages. In other words, each man had to



pay for the explosives he used. He also had to pay for fuses and 'caps', or detonators. If he needed carbide for his lamp, he had to buy that separately as well, usually from the Co-op.

Terri remembers groceries being delivered from the Co-op: "Mr Howell would bring the groceries round the back to the kitchen and, if no one was home, he would put the perishables away for the housewife, no extra charge. He always left the carbide the miners used for their lamps outside. It came in a brown paper bag and had a distinct smell."

The miners were well practiced in setting charges in the mine. The rule was that you set one charge at a time, but some miners liked to set more than one – sometimes a line of charges – so they could loosen enough coal to keep them busy for the whole day – or week. The quicker they got coal into the skips, the more money they made since they were paid at a hewing rate.

The first thing they did was bore a six-foot long hole into the rock below the seam. Then they would get the charge ready by first cutting a length of fuse and inserting one end into a detonator and crimping it with a crimping tool before inserting the detonator and fuse wire into one end of the gelignite cartridge, all the while handling the material very carefully. Slowly the "shot" would be placed into the drilled hole using a long wooden stick cut for the purpose. The shot would be packed in – six-foot deep - with coal and clay. The fuse would be a safe length so whoever lit it would have time enough to shelter away from the impending blast.

In mines where there was no methane, miners could use a match to light the fuse. In "safety" mines, where there was danger of methane, a man called a "shot firer" did the rounds of all the bords and used an electric magneto, a box with a key that was wound up and as it was released created a charge strong enough to fire the shots. It seems to me, this was a dangerous job, but maybe not as dangerous as handling the gelignite itself, as the miners did.

Of course things could go wrong. The Mine Inspector, whose job it was to watch safety procedures throughout the mine, stopped one new miner just time from using an iron bar capable of creating sparks to tamp the hole his charge was in. The miner was fined.

Disastrous mistakes happened. A fatality occurred in McBride Tunnel back in 1910 when Sam Wilson was killed by the explosion of a 'lost' blasting charge. While he was drilling a hole, the drill came in contact with an old charge that had never gone off and been left in the rock. This was

why only one charge at a time should be laid so the miners can be sure no live charge has been overlooked.

Another fatality occurred in 1930 when Jack Poli and Emilio (Skippy) Dalla Rosa fired a shot, which loosened the timber in the roof of their bord. While they were fixing it another shot was fired by a party working in the next tunnel. The wall between the two

tunnels was not as thick as they imagined and the shot went through the wall mortally wounding Jack and seriously injuring Skippy. The cries of the two injured men brought the others running, but Jack died.

Terri Allen's Grandfather, Cliff Gitsham, was temporarily blinded when a lost shot went off where he was working.

Mining is dangerous business, and everyone knows it, but that didn't stop larrikin behavior. Two miners, who were avid fishermen, made a plan to purloin a few sticks of gellie and use it to deepen Lake Lister so the fish there could thrive. It is difficult to imagine how they did it, but they managed to blow a hole deep enough in the lake to break up the coffee rock below it. The lake immediately drained away never to be seen again. Now, for the kids in Wonthaggi, that's a disaster!

It's a powerful history we have in this district and there is no end to the stories.

- c.r. landon

