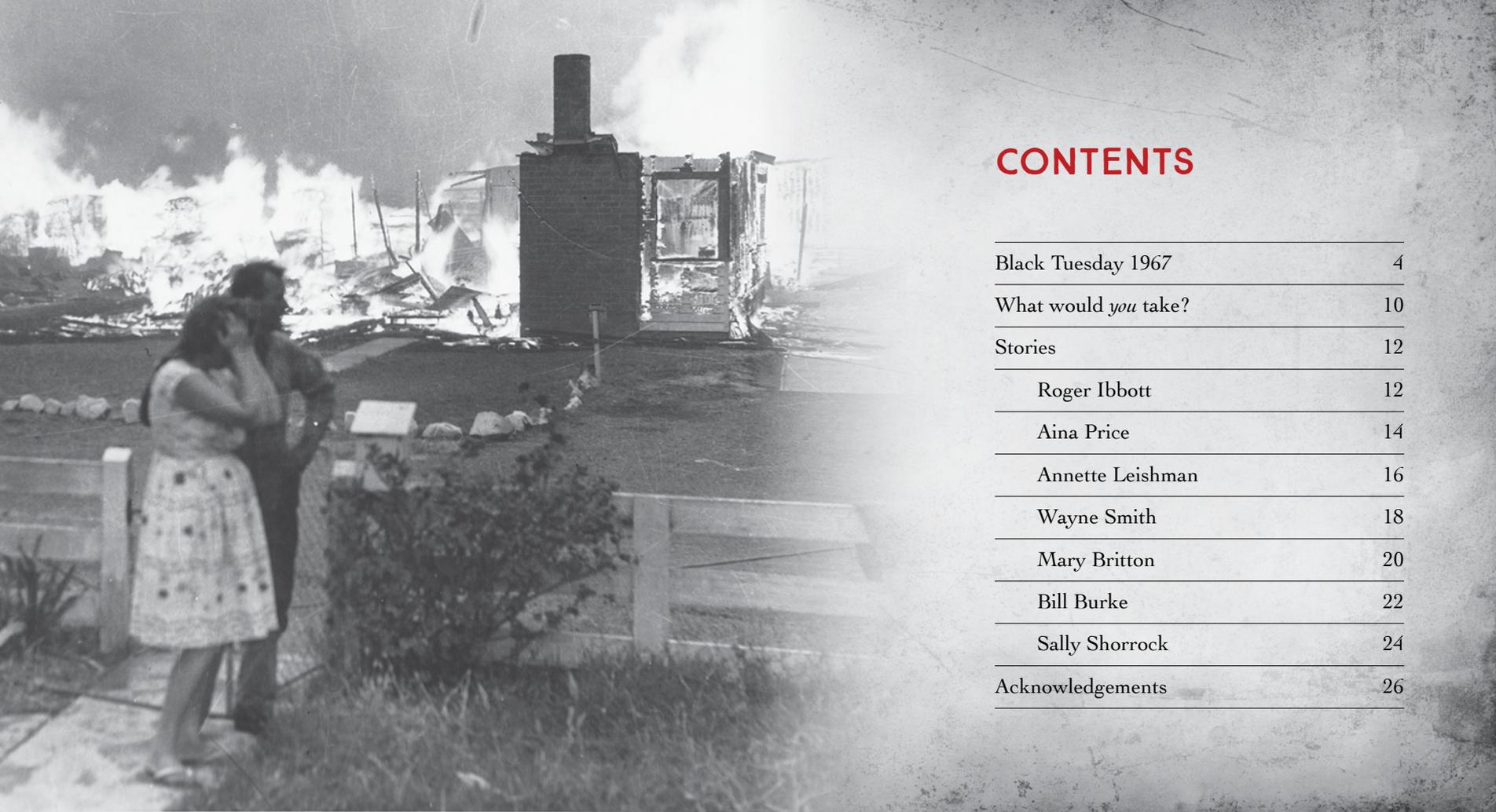
A black and white photograph capturing the aftermath of a bushfire. In the foreground, a young child stands amidst a sea of rubble, holding a doll. Another child is crouching nearby. The background shows the skeletal remains of buildings and a large brick structure on the left. The sky is filled with smoke and ash.

# WHAT WOULD *you* TAKE?

1967 BUSHFIRES



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### What would *you* take?

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ABOVE: Mr and Mrs Gard of Sorell watch in horror as their house burns  
(Image courtesy Tasmanian Archive & Heritage Office)

# BLACK TUESDAY 1967



**F**EBRUARY 1967 saw some of the worst fire conditions in living memory; strong rains in the winter and spring of 1966 and the dry summer that followed left much of Tasmania ready to burn. From Monday 6 February extreme fire danger was forecast, but no-one was prepared for the holocaust that would soon be known as Black Tuesday, 7 February 1967.

Fires ravaged Tasmania from Rokeby to the Derwent Valley and south to the Huon, as well as coming within 1.6 km of Hobart. Temperatures soared above 39°C and wind gusts of up to 120 knots were recorded, fanning the flames beyond any hope of control. Across Tasmania, 55 people lost their lives, with another 9 people dying during the fires from 'natural causes'.

LEFT: Burning house in Kingston, 7 February 1967  
(Image courtesy *The Mercury*)



TOP: Injured and homeless, these fire refugees are coming to their temporary refuge at the Brighton Army Camp (Image courtesy *The Mercury*)



ABOVE: Survivors of Black Tuesday return to the ruins of their home near Hobart, 8 February 1967 (Image courtesy Fairfax Syndication)



TOP: One of 16 homes destroyed in Forest Road, West Hobart (Image courtesy *The Mercury*)



ABOVE: Volunteer firefighter equipped with a knapsack sprayer; most volunteers had little more than these sprayers, beaters and rakes to keep back the flames (Image courtesy Roger McNiece OAM)



LEFT: One of the most moving captions printed after the fires — “Eyes that cannot see, but they weep from the pain and loss of his dairy herd” (Image courtesy Fairfax Syndication)



ABOVE: Members of the Army Fire Service assisted across the state, including Rokeby (Image courtesy Fairfax Syndication)

In the Clarence area, fires had been burning in Flagstaff Gully for some days before Black Tuesday; by the morning of 7 February, they were out of control. With the extreme heat and winds behind it, the fire travelled south on two fronts, reaching Warrane and crossing the Tasman Highway about 1 pm, eventually reaching Pass Road, Rokeby, Lauderdale, Roches Beach, Cremorne and Seven Mile Beach. Fires were also burning at Geilston Bay and down the hills at the back of Bellerive and Howrah. Many houses were saved by homeowners beating out the fires with sacks and whatever water was available.

Within Clarence, Rokeby suffered the worst that day; with no reticulated water and no fire brigade, the fact that Rokeby survived at all is due the efforts of volunteer firefighters and the townspeople desperately trying to save houses. But despite their best efforts, and the arrival later in the day of an army unit, two women died at Rokeby — an elderly woman, Mrs Freeman, was found dead in a gutter, and Mary Britton lost her life when her home *The Nutshell* burnt to the ground (see page 20). Aside from the human cost, the historic township of Rokeby was devastated by the fires, with many of its colonial buildings lost to the flames.

Recovery from Black Tuesday presented a daunting task for Tasmania. The fires destroyed 1,293 houses, leaving nearly 7,500 people homeless. Property losses amounted to \$40,000,000, including vital infrastructure such as factories, schools, and power lines. But the people of Tasmania, with the help of the Government, Army, Red Cross and a multitude of caring friends, neighbours and shopkeepers rallied to overcome the disaster. Fifty years on, the scars of Black Tuesday remain, but so do the memories of a community brought together by tragedy.

By the end of Black Tuesday, five Clarence residents had lost their lives; the two women in Rokeby and three men from Bellerive who died fighting fires in Lenah Valley.



TOP RIGHT: Rokeby House, nearly destroyed by the fires, was later rebuilt (Image courtesy *The Mercury*)

RIGHT: Aerial view of fire-devastated Rokeby (Image courtesy *The Mercury*)

# WHAT WOULD *you* TAKE?

**T**HAT WAS THE QUESTION we asked the community in the lead up to the 50th anniversary of Black Tuesday, in preparation for an exhibition to commemorate this terrifying moment in Tasmania's history.

With the help of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, our goal was to view the bushfires through the prism of items that people took with them when they had to flee. Their choices were sometimes mundane, sometimes precious and often surprising. These are their stories.

RIGHT: All that could be saved before fire took hold in this home at Berriedale (Image courtesy *The Mercury*)

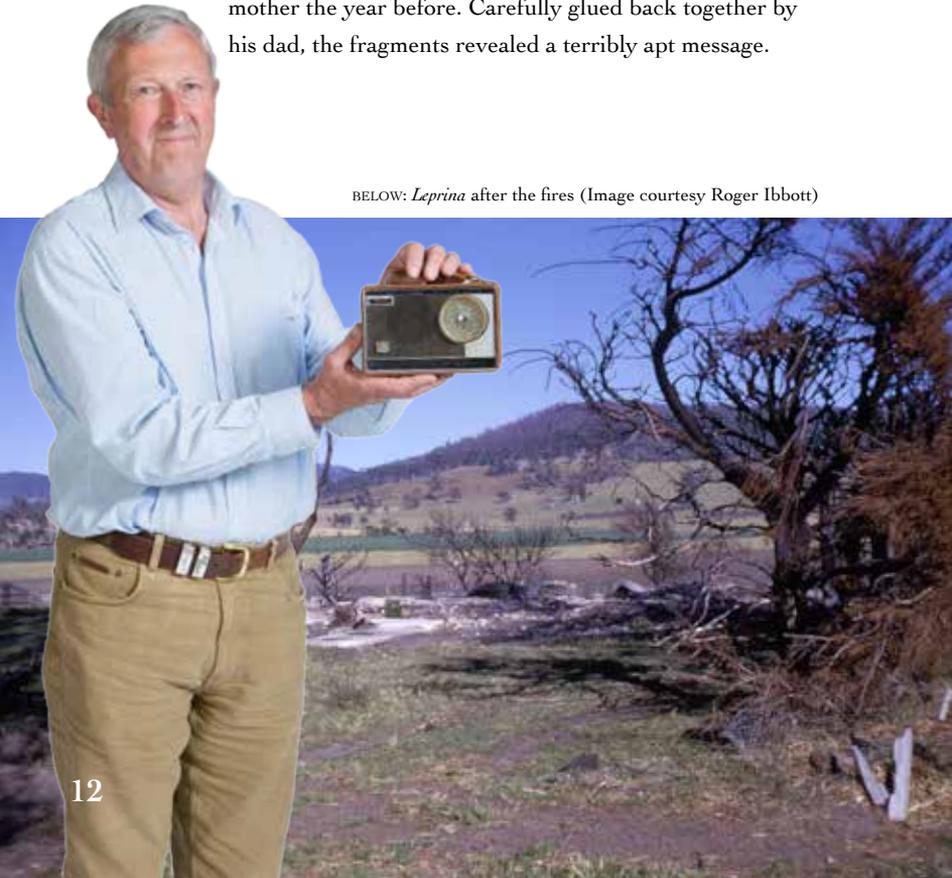


## ROGER IBBOTT

Back in February 1967, Roger Ibbott was living on his family's farm *Leprina* near Orielton. Despite their best efforts, the home was lost to the flames of Black Tuesday. Roger saved his transistor radio, which nearly melted in the heat.

In the aftermath of the fires, Roger was raking through the ashes and found fragments of an ashtray he had given his mother the year before. Carefully glued back together by his dad, the fragments revealed a terribly apt message.

BELOW: *Leprina* after the fires (Image courtesy Roger Ibbott)



And the transistor radio? Well, the night after the fires, Roger managed to get the old radio going again. With the farmhouse burnt to the ground and the whole family billeted with relatives, the first song to come out of the radio was Tom Jones singing "The Green Green Grass of Home".



## AINA PRICE

Aina's grandparents Julijs and Katrina Miežitis emigrated from Latvia during the chaos that followed World War Two. When Black Tuesday struck in February 1967, they were living in Hillborough Road, South Hobart. As the fire front approached their house, Julijs and Katrina fled the flames, waiting out the fire in the open space of a nearby rubbish dump. On the way, Julijs found a hiding spot for the family's jewellery, under a wooden board in a neighbour's front garden. The fires reduced their house to ashes, and also swept over Julijs' hiding spot.



LEFT: Julijs and Katrina several years before the fires (Image courtesy Aina Price)

When they came back to Hillborough Road to rake through the ashes, they found the jewellery — charred, discoloured and in places melted, but still recognisably theirs. These three objects — the watch, shell cameo and amethyst ear-ring — survived World War Two, emigration to the other side of the world, and the total destruction of the family home in the fires of Black Tuesday.



## ANNETTE LEISHMAN

Annette Leishman was just 10 years old when Black Tuesday struck, but even at that age she has very strong memories of this event. With her parents and four siblings, Annette lived in a house at Forcett. Annette's father spent the day helping neighbours prepare for the fires, and her mum packed an emergency escape suitcase which Annette remembers to this day — toys and cardigans for each of the children, nappies for the baby and the family photograph album.

For Annette, Black Tuesday was a very exciting day. Along with all the other students at the Sorell School, Annette was evacuated to open ground near Pittwater. And, by extraordinary coincidence, that's exactly where Ashton's Circus happened

to be camped, complete with elephants, tigers and so on. So what was a terrible day for most turned out to be one of the best school days Annette ever experienced, watching elephants wade at the water's edge.

As for the case with the cardigans and toys, it turns out the case was packed about 50 years too early. The Leishman home avoided the flames of 1967 but burnt to the ground in the fires of 2013, just three days before the passing of Annette's mum Pauline Leishman.



BELOW: Annette's beloved elephants arriving in Sydney late February 1967 (Image courtesy Fairfax Syndication)





## WAYNE SMITH

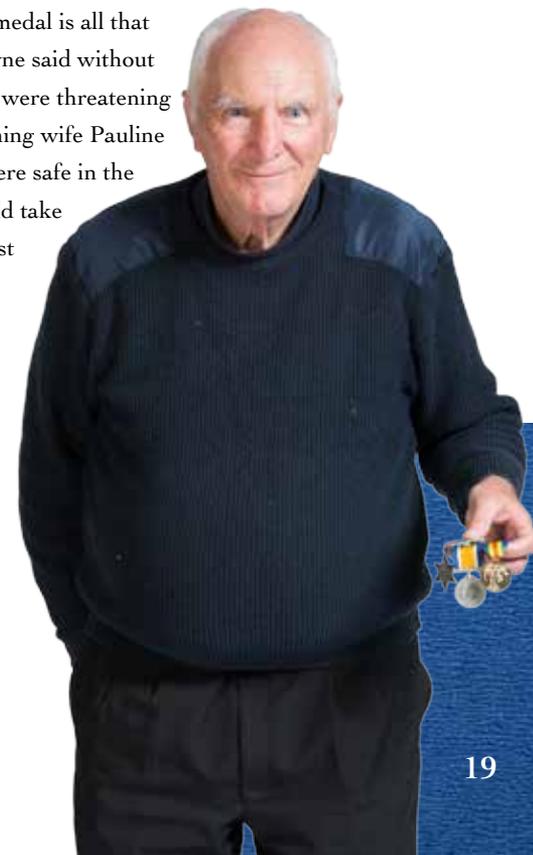
Days after the 1967 Black Tuesday bushfire, Wayne Smith and wife Pauline were combing through the ashes of their mother's Fern Tree home and came across a large silver coin, which Pauline simply dropped in her coin collection where it stayed for the next forty years, until Wayne's son noticed small details on the edge of the coin. After a lot of polishing, it turned out to be Wayne's grandfather W.E. Gibson's First World War service medal, lost in the bushfires and then forgotten in a coin collection for decades.

Stranger still is the story of how Wayne retrieved his father James Smith's World War Two service medal. James Smith died as a prisoner of war on the infamous Thai-Burma railway and was buried nearby; as Wayne put it, "He died of cholera after three months on the railway; he was one of the lucky ones". All that came home were his war medals, and these were lost on Black Tuesday. Years later, Sue Morrison from Fern Tree found



a blackened, fire-damaged war medal in her garden. She knew it must be precious to somebody, but all she could make out was the surname "Smith". Sue kept the medal for 30 years, and over that time found a connection to Wayne Smith by searching land title records.

Then, in 2015, she visited Wayne at his Lauderdale home to hand over the medal, one of the most moving experiences of his life. Wayne was just six years old when he last saw his father; the miraculously returned medal is all that remains. When asked, Wayne said without hesitation that if a bushfire were threatening his house today (and assuming wife Pauline and their beloved terrier were safe in the car), the first thing he would take is the medal — "It's the most precious object I have".



# MARY BRITTON

Mary Britton was one of five Clarence residents who lost their lives during the bushfires.

At the time of the fires, Mary and her husband John lived at *The Nutshell*, a small timber cottage in Rokeby. As the fires approached, neighbour Keith Luckman came to collect Mary, but at the last minute she ran back into the house, saying “I’ve just got to go back and get something”. Moments later the house burst into flames and Mary was never seen again.

Her tragic story illuminates the way that communities, in the aftermath of disaster, try to make sense of tragedy. Many believed she had gone back in to save her refrigerator, which were very expensive appliances at that time. But this

is an unlikely scenario given the unwieldy weight of fridges back then; what she really went back for we will probably never know.

Mary is remembered by her niece Marg Essen as a very kind woman who married late in life, having looked after her parents during their last illnesses. Mary was 61 years old when the Black Tuesday fires took her life.



BELOW: *The Nutshell*, date unknown  
(Image courtesy Clarence Plains  
Historical Society)



ABOVE: Mary  
Britton earlier  
in life (Image  
courtesy Mrs  
Marg Essen)

## BILL BURKE

Bill Burke joined the Hobart Fire Brigade in 1957, retiring 50 years later at the age of 70, so he knows a thing or two about fighting fires. Bill remembers the morning of Tuesday 7 February 1967 all too well; coming off a 24-hour shift, Bill was told at eight that morning that there would be no rest for the next few days. In fact, he didn't make it home for dinner until the Friday night, three long days later. Bill helped fight fires at Mount Nelson and Fern Tree. All that he

and his comrades had was a flat tray truck, two 44 gallon drums of water, and a pile of "pockets" (hessian sugar bags). Bill remembers that, with multiple fire fronts converging, there was little they could do with the equipment they had, but he and his crew managed to save lives by evacuating people to the Mount Nelson Signal Station.

BELOW: Firefighter beating out flames approaching a house in West Hobart (Image courtesy Fairfax Syndication)



## SALLY SHORROCK

Sally Shorrock's memories of Black Tuesday are not about what she took, but what many of her friends took. In the aftermath of the disaster, Sally got in touch with a number of female friends, many of whom said the first thing they grabbed whilst evacuating their homes was their contraceptive pills.

This may seem an odd choice now, but in 1967 it made perfect sense. First introduced in Australia in 1961, "the Pill" ushered in a revolution that has changed the way we live to this day. For women born in the 1930s, more

than 40 per cent had 9 or more pregnancies; the introduction of the pill in 1961 gave women real control over their fertility for the first time in history. But there was a catch — fears of widespread debauchery meant that many doctors would only prescribe the pill to married women, even as late as the 1970s.

So, for many women in 1967, the pill was a precious object, and the obvious first choice to take when escaping the bushfires.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Tasmanian Fire Museum

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Roger McNiece OAM

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The Mercury *Newspapers in Education* program

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Fairfax Syndication

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Pharmaceutical Defence Ltd

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The Moorings Museum, Bellerive

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Cardigans reproduced by Chris Luck and Dianne Briggs

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TOP LEFT: Hydro crews rallying to restore power in the days following Black Tuesday (Image courtesy Fairfax Syndication)

TOP RIGHT: Three generations of the Titmus family scour the ruins of their Ferntree home (Image courtesy *The Mercury*)

RIGHT: For many people who lived through the fires, the outstanding memory is of entire streets devastated, leaving only chimneys intact (Image courtesy Fairfax Syndication)



# WHAT WOULD *you* TAKE?

1967 BUSHFIRES

ABOVE: Two days after the fire – looking for toys amongst the ruins in Strickland Avenue, South Hobart (Image courtesy The Moorings Museum / Don Stevens Collection)

COVER: These boys found at least something that survived the fires — a teapot and part of a tea service (Image courtesy Fairfax Syndication)

Commemorating the 50th anniversary  
of the 1967 bushfires

