The Australian
Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE6627

Hodges, Florence (Florrie) Evelyn

(1911 - 1972)

Born	19110101, Victoria
Died	19721231, Daylesford Victoria
Occupation	Housewife

Summary

Florrie Hodges was only a teenager when her heroics at the mill settlement near Powelltown, Victoria, captured the national imagination. On Sunday February 14, 1926, she was at home with members of her family when they felt the full impact of the catastophic bushfires that surrounded them.

Instructed by her mother to take the children to safety, she walked for miles with her three younger siblings, finally lying down on a train track and shielding them with her own body when there was nothing to do except allow the fire to burn over the top of them. They all survived, but Florrie received horrific burns to her legs and back. She was hospitalised for several months and left disabled and disfigured.

Stories of the heroics of ‘the little bush girl of Powelltown’ emerged quickly after the fires were put out and Florrie Hodges became something of a celebrity. Her bravery was recognised far and wide and she was awarded a Royal Humane Society medal.

Details

The following details are taken from an article written by the authors and published in the Victorian Historical Journal, June 2020

John Schauble's excellent article about Victoria's Forgotten 1926 Bushfires (published in this journal in December 2019) reminds us of the importance of this event to reframing the relationship between Victorians and their environment. It also reminds us how quickly events can be forgotten, when bigger, seemingly more catastrophic, events happen subsequently. The 1926 fires in Gippsland have been 'jettisoned to a more distant past', barely memorialised in art, literature or history, despite killing more Victorians, proportionately, than any fires before or since except the 1939 fires. Schauble makes a strong case for the 'Great Fires of 1926' to be remembered better, as a turning point, a moment in time when Victorians reviewed their relationship to 'the bush' and reorganised their 'social and practical responses to bushfire'.

As well as understanding the social and political lessons learned from them, we should remember the 1926 fires better because of their human cost. They devastated small communities in Gippsland and the impact of that trauma is a living memory for descendents of some survivors. Through the story of Florrie Hodges, a teenager who survived the fires and became a celebrity for her heroics, we can explore themes that resonate nearly one hundred years later, such as the nature of celebrity, gendered narratives of heroics and intergenerational impact of unresolved trauma. It is the latter of these themes I'd like to reflect upon here, with passing reference to the nature of fame and heroics.

Schauble highlights the remarkable story of Florrie Hodges, a fourteen year old girl from a mill settlement near Powelltown, whose heroics captured the national imagination. On Sunday February 14, 1926, she was at home with members of her family when the fire exploded about them. Instructed by her mother to take the children to safety, she walked for some miles with her three younger siblings, Rita, Vera and seventeen month old Dorothy, finally lying down on a train track and shielding them with her own body when there was nothing to do except allow the fire to burn over the top of them. They all survived, but Florrie received horrific burns to her legs and back. She was hospitalised for several months and was left disabled and disfigured.

Stories of the heroics of 'the little bush girl of Powelltown' emerged quickly after the fires were put out and Florrie Hodges became something of a celebrity. Her bravery was recognised far and wide; she was awarded a Royal Humane Society medal and a testimonial fund launched and administered by the Timber Worker' Union raised some £1000 to be placed in trust until she was 21, her father being very anxious about her future and the need to make sure that the funds were to be clearly available fo her own use. Politicians, unionists, even famous actors were keen to share the stage with Florrie at various events held in her honour. Important labour figure Jean Daley spoke at an event held in May and the actor, Louise Lovely, appeared at one in September, along with a range of other artists and the Returned Soldiers Memorial Band.

If, as Schauble suggests, the 1926 fires produced little in the way of cultural product, it seems that what little emerged was focussed on a fourteen year old girl. A souvenir booklet was published, 100,000 photographs distributed to schoolchildren across the nation, Queen Mary and the Duchess of York proudly received photographs of the 'Australian Heroine', a special gramophone recording of Florrie telling her story was released and Mary Grant Bruce wrote a special version of her story that was published in the School Magazine. She, through her deeds, was variously described as 'carrying the spirit of many a pioneer mother', exhibiting 'the endurance of a Spartan and the pluck and fortitude of Nurse Cavell' and equalling the heroics of soldiers in the Boer and Great Wars. 'The battlefields of South Africa, Gallipoli and Flanders,' said Jean Daley at her testimonial, 'had not furnished a braver deed than the act of heroism performed by the little bush girl of Powelltown.' Florrie was very proud of the various honours and accolades she received, but using a modest heroes' refrain familiar to all of us, when asked to speak, told people 'she thought that any Australian girl would have done what she did'.

And despite a small glitch with a poorly attended Sydney event, organised by the Feminist Club and the League of Child Helpers, after which Sydneysiders were scolded for rushing to greet 'every visiting celebrity, but not the girl 'descended of the race that gave the world the Anzacs' who exhibitied, 'the most outstanding act of heroism of the year, if not the decade', Florrie's story still resonated some years after the events. In a 1931 issue of The Freeman's Journal, children's submissions were published under the title 'My Favourite Heroine'. Ten year old Enid Casey asked her readers, 'Do you remember the story of Florrie Hodges' and explained why she was 'her favourite Heroine'. and during 'fire season' in 1934, the story of 'the 'Heroine of Black Sunday' was retold, in the wake of severe fires in Tasmania and Victorian timber country. After this, there is little to be found about Florrie and her life after the fires. Perhaps, after the 1939 fires, all other fires paled into historical insignificance.

Perhaps there are other reasons to explain Florrie's loss of celebratory over the years that relate more directly to her own life experiences after the fires? Finding an online image of her bravery award and the purse presented to Florrie at the testimonial in her honour created a chain of correspondence between my colleague at the Australian Women's Archives Project, Helen Morgan, and one of Florrie's descendents, Joy Welch. Helen had been tracing stories of early twentieth century 'girl heroes' and was immediately drawn to Florrie's tale. She found the name of the donor of the purse to Museum Victoria via their website and this act of curation provided her with a contact to Joy.

Joy offered to collect stories at a family gathering to be held in early February. Florrie passed away in 1972 but several elderly relatives who remembered her were willing to talk about what they knew and remembered. Many of them became very emotional while doing so, but persevered because they wanted Florrie's story better known. 'They thought the importance of remembering and recognizing her bravery, [talking about] what had happened to her goes quite a way to

explaining her life after the event,' said Joy. It had not been a particularly happy one.

A nephew, Stan Gleeson, now 87, remembers her well and speaks of his visits to her house in Lyonville, near Trentham. Florrie married her cousin, Bill, soon after the accident, when she was sixteen. Bill worked in the timber mill and he had a couple of serious injuries, so both he and Florrie would have been in constant discomfort or pain. They lived a very simple life. Florrie was remembered as a tough, no nonsense woman, who didn't talk much. She never spoke of the fire, the attention afterwards or the impact it had on her or her body. Her preference was to seek company at the pub, where she was seen regularly, an uncommon sight in those days. Most other women were at home with the children but Florrie was often to be found at the local with her husband drinking. Due to the couple's history, it seems that the extended family looked out for them as much as possible. Everyone knew they both had alcohol issues and everyone attributed that to the trauma they experienced.

They had 6 children, with only four living to adulthood, and the trauma was intergenerational. Their daughter Nancy had a number of children that were mainly placed in care due to her alcohol issues. Their son Bill did not have children but he passed away in a Salvation Army home as a chronic alcoholic. Little is known about the two youngest children, but it is known that all of them had been in and out of care due to Florrie and Bill's inability to care for them. The extended family tried many times to take them all in (especially the two little ones) but the State judged their own families to be too large to permit them taking in any additional children. Some family members who Joy spoke with still got emotional when they spoke about their parents not being allowed to take care of them – they didn't want the children to be placed in an orphanage. They were acutely aware that if it hadn't been for Florrie, their mother's would have perished in the fire and they would not be there, in 2020 telling her story.

It is important to Stan Gleeson that Florrie be remembered because the past lives on in the present. His son, a Country Fire Authority (CFA) member, rescued people in the 2009 Black Saturday fires. He suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), so Stan's knowledge of Florrie's story helped him to understand the impact similar trauma could have on his own son. He knows how trauma unresolved or dealt with can continue to play out for years to come. It has made a difference to them as they create a pathway to recovery for their son.

In her email, Joy Welch sadly noted that 'in saving others, Florrie lost herself', and talking about it now, we can see the far-reaching implications, for Florrie, her children and her grandchildren. Even at the time, there were commentators who recognised that risk. Dr Irene Stable, the Medical Officer for the Victorian Education Department observed with some foreboding that:

'The child will bear the marks of the fire throughout her life, as an external manifestation of her suffering; nothing will ever reveal the deep scar which this terrifying event has left on her memory; nothing will erase it….'

It's fair to say that nothing ever did.

Recognising Florrie's story is to recognize the damage that continues to be done when past trauma is not acknowledged. It's not just about celebrating bravery as achievement – it's about remembering that for very many women and men, bravery as 'achievement' has come at a significant cost. Honouring the stories of brave women like Florrie helps us to reimagine what it means to be brave, and how careful we must be with our heroes.

Events

1926 - 1926
Royal Humane Society Award

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