

MARYSVILLE TIMBER & SEASONING COMPANY'S No. 1 MILL

Was established on the banks of the Wills Creek in the mid-1930s, and was cutting Mountain Ash and Messmate around the mill and on the top of Mount Bismark (now Mount Kitchener). When fire threatened the area in 1939, twenty seven men were at the mill, the women and children having been sent into Marysville as there had been several spot fires in the district on the preceding day.

By 3:00pm it was as black as night due to the smoke blotting out the sun. Word had arrived for the men to be prepared to try to save the mill as the fire could not be stopped. Mill manager Ron Anderson had brought the bush crews in and abandoned any machinery which could not be shifted in time. The mill horses were taken into Marysville by Don Lovett who returned to the mill on his motorbike.

The area around the mill was reasonably clear, and the water was available from a dam higher up Wilks Creek, but there were one and a quarter million super feet of sawn timber stacked in the mill yard for air-drying. Burning gas arrived 100 yards in advance of the main fire. It was immediately apparent that nothing could be done to save the mill, and Ron Anderson yelled out "Save yourselves! Bugger the mill, we'll build another one."

Nine men made it to the mill's dugout, nine were trapped on the mill's cricket pitch, and the rest ran to a waterhole on Wilks Creek. One man, Charlie Greateorex, filled a five-pound jam tin with water and ran straight through the fire. Dipping his handkerchief into the water to wet his face, he walked all the way to Marysville through the burning bush. When he arrived he was almost delirious and said "They're all gone out there, I heard them screaming". He was hardly burned at all.

Those left at the mill survived a twelve hour ordeal. Trapped on the cricket pitch were Ron Anderson, Don Lovett, Ham Blackwood, and six other mill workers. Don Lovett collapsed twice before he reached the precarious safety of the small clearing. He lay in the open on the bare dirt and scratched a hole in the dirt with his hands to shield his face.

Between them, the men had a dish of water and survived by moistening their handkerchiefs and breathing through them. They lay for four hours amongst a heap of empty fuel drums in the clearing until help arrived at 3.00am.

Following the 1939 fires Government policy changed and permanent mill settlements were no longer allowed to be allocated within the forests because of the risk of fire.

(Source: Australian Heritage Database, Place ID: 102608)