TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

given before

the

ROYAL COMMISSION APPOINTED TO INQUIRE INTO THE
CAUSES AND ORIGINS AND OTHER MATTERS ARISING
OUT OF BUSH FIRES IN VICTORIA
DURING JANUARY, 1939.

held at

MELBOURNE

on

TUESDAY, 31st JANUARY, 1939.

PRESENT:

HIS HONOUR JUDGE STRETTON, Royal Commissioner.

MR. GREGORY GOWANS, appeared to assist the Commission.

MR. W. SLATER, appeared on behalf of the Victorian Foresters' Association.

MR. W. P. EVANS, appeared on behalf of the Federated Engineers and Firemen's Association.

MR. A.W. STONEHILL, appeared on behalf of the Hardwood Millers' Association of Victoria.

MR. W. SWINDON, (President), appeared on behalf of the Victorian Bush Fire Brigades' Association.

MR. KELSO, appeared on behalf of the Melbourne & Metropolitan Board of Works.

MRS. F. COTTER, appeared to represent the humanitarian point of view and to request the appointment of a Ministry of Social Services.

MR. A. D. HARDY, appeared on behalf of the Forests League.

MR. P. A. CARRINES, Secretary of the Commission, read the Terms of Reference.
THE COMMISSIONER: The purpose of this preliminary meeting is to determine after obtaining the opinions of those present what course should be pursued by this Commission. My own opinion—which is open to change if I can be persuaded that there is a better course—is that it will be best to hear formal evidence in Melbourne today with the object of ascertaining from that evidence and from maps of the localities concerned the extent of the recent bush fires, and having envisaged as well as possible the course of those fires to proceed to places at the site of or near by the fires where people who can give evidence are now situated. It is my personal view that the best method to approach this problem is to collect whatever local evidence is available at first hand and I propose to leave Melbourne as early as possible on the projected tour with that end in view. If any gentlemen present have any suggestions I will be pleased to hear them.

MR. STONEHILL: I am not in a position at present to indicate the evidence that will be called by the Hardwood Millers' Association but I can furnish particulars to the Secretary of the Commission tomorrow. It is proposed to call evidence to show the extent of the fires in our particular areas and the losses that have occurred to the sawmilling industry generally. That evidence will be available on Thursday.

THE COMMISSIONER: It will be sufficient if you will indicate to the Secretary or Mr. Gowans the names of the witnesses you intend to call and the nature of the evidence they will give.

MR. SLATER: An officer of the Forests Commission is prepared to give formal evidence this afternoon as to the nature and extent of the fires. At this stage I take it that it is not desired that he should be presented for cross-examination.

THE COMMISSIONER: No, I do not wish any contest to arise on the formal evidence. Anybody wishing to cross-examine the witness referred to will have ample opportunity at a later stage.
We are merely doing the groundwork today and dealing with non-contentious matters. Later, if anybody wished to call evidence, following the usual procedure, it will be led by Mr. Gowans and any counsel or advocate will have the right to cross-examine. At this stage, however, I do not wish to have any cross-examination on merely formal matters.

MR. GOWANS: I am prepared to lead some evidence which will be mainly of this nature: Some maps of Victoria will be produced which will show the areas affected by the fires and the approximate limit of the fire areas. Special areas will be delineated on the maps to show where the fires occurred at their greatest intensity. There will be a special map and an aerial fire patrol map of the Central Forest Division. There will be set out the situations of the various mills that were burnt out and the situations of other mills that have been preserved. It will indicate the places where there has been loss of life and the number of people who lost their lives in the particular localities.

I also propose to put in as formal evidence the regulations under the Forests Act and any amendments of those Regulations, proclamations which have been issued since the beginning of the present season and the Annual Reports of the Forests Commission for the past seven years since 1932, showing when serious fires occurred, together with a general statement of the cause of the fires which has been compiled from the Reports furnished by officers of the Forests Commission during that period. Before doing so I would like to ask permission to refer generally to the legislation affecting the Forests Commission and the control of bush fires; That is contained mainly in the Forests Act 1928 which I merely propose tendering

Discussion:
to the Secretary of the Commission unless it is desired that it be marked as an Exhibit.

THE COMMISSIONER: No, I do not think that is necessary.

MR. GOWANS: I refer in particular to three sections. The first is Section 40 which requires the Forests Commission to prepare reports as follows (read.). There are set out a number of subject matters which are to be covered by the reports.

Sub-paragraph (a) (4) is as follows: (read.). Section 68 provides as follows: (Read.). The various sub-sections of Section 68 set out the sanctions, etc., for putting that into operation. Clause 5 of the Section states: (read.) and Section 9 provides as follows: (read.) Sub-section (3) states as follows: (read.).

All I desire to do at this stage is to direct attention to the fact that the Commission is established under the Forests Act for the maintenance of forests as such. It becomes obvious on reading the Section that the object of this Legislation is the preservation of forests, and State forests in particular. It is not general legislation aimed at the preservation of life or property. I have tried to ascertain whether there is any legislation requiring the imposition of safeguards in regard to life or property in general, whether connected with State forests or otherwise, and it appears to me that Section 20 of the Police Offences Act contains practically the only legislation that deals with that matter. Apart from that I do not think there is any general legislation in Victoria aimed at preventing bush fires as affecting the point of view of the community in general. I now propose to call Mr. Torbet of the Forests Commission to give formal evidence.

REGINALD EDWARD TORBET, Sworn and Examined:

MR. GOWANS: What is your full name?—Reginald Edward Torbet.
I am an officer employed by the Forests Commission and I hold the position of Field Officer in Charge of Forest Protection for the whole of Victoria. I produce a map of Victoria showing the forest reserves. The purple outline represents approximately the areas in Victoria over which fires have burnt during the past season. The red-shaded areas indicate where the fires have been of major intensity.

..........EXHIBIT "A".................Map of Victoria showing forest areas with fire areas coloured purple and red.

I also produce a large scale map of the same area marked in the same way as Exhibit "A".

..........EXHIBIT "B"..................Large scale map of Victoria showing forest areas with fire areas coloured purple and red.

This map shows the same areas and has the same purpose as Exhibit "A". These maps are compiled from information obtained from Forest officers throughout the State but at the present stage they are only approximate. Our information is not complete.

I produce an aerial fire control map of the Central Forest Division.

..........EXHIBIT "C"..................Aerial fire control map of the Central Forest Division.

That map shows the mills that have been burnt out and those that have been preserved to date. The red circle denotes the former and the green circles indicate the mills that have escaped the fires. The names of the mills are shown. So far as that area is concerned the map also shows where lives were lost and the number of deaths in each case. The green shading is the area of reserve forests. The uncoloured portion is either Crown Lands or private property. At the moment I have no maps showing particulars of other areas.

MR. GOWANS: From the information that the Commission has in its
possession to date, what is the number of lives lost in Victoria because of bush fires during January of this year?—70 or 71.

THERE was a death yeaterday?—We have only press reports of that.

I produce a schedule setting out the acreage of unalienated Crown lands in Victoria.

EXHIBIT "D". Schedule showing areas of unalienated land in the State of Victoria as at 1st January, 1939.

THE COMMISSIONER: Opposite the name Powelltown there appears in Roman figures the number XVII. What does that mean?—It represents a land mark on the spot in Roman numerals for the purpose of enabling the aerial patrol to pick up its location. It has no relation to this inquiry. The schedule shows that the total area of unalienated land is 23,490,082 acres.

Then there are details set out of the unoccupied portions of those unalienated Crown lands. Those areas total 878,090 acres. About half of that is held under grazing lease; some in ordinary unoccupied Crown land not under lease or licence. Then the remaining area, other than unoccupied Crown land, is set out. There are about 12,000,000 acres consisting of State forests etc. It may be of some importance subsequently to ascertain where and to what extent grazing licences have been issued.

I also put in the regulations under the Forests Act and the amendments there to.

EXHIBIT "E". Regulations under Forest Act and Amendments.

MR. GOWANS: A copy of a proclamation pursuant to Section 69 of the Forests Act promulgated on 21st November 1938 will also be put in. Section 69 of the Act gives power to the Minister upon the report of the Forests Commission that the season is one that is conducive to bush fires to issue a proclamation in regard to the lighting of
fires in certain areas, etc. You produce a copy of that proclamation?—Yes.

EXHIBIT "F". Copy of proclamation pursuant to Section 69 of Forests Act promulgated on 21st November, 1938.

I produce copies of the Annual Reports made by the Forests Commission from 1932 onwards. (13th to 19th Reports inclusive).

EXHIBIT "G". Copies of Annual Reports by Forests Commission.

MR. GOWANS: Those reports are made in pursuance of Section 40 of the Act. The Forests Commission is required to report what steps it has taken in regard to the prevention of bush fires and the preservation of forests. I do not propose to read any of the reports at this stage.

THE COMMISSIONER: No. I can inform myself in private about them. Perhaps they will be discussed publicly later on.

MR. GOWANS: I now produce a Statement of Causes of fires made up from Reports of Forest officers over the last seven years.

EXHIBIT "H". Statement of Causes.

I understand that that does not include the fires in January of this year?—No, it is exclusive of those fires.

THE COMMISSIONER: That is the history of Causes over the last seven years?—Yes. It is compiled from the reports received from the District officers throughout the State as to the causes of fires within their respective districts. We have resident officers throughout the State.

MR. GOWANS: Is this form of report that I submit to you still used by forest officers throughout the State and is it the basis of the statement which has just been put in?—Yes.

EXHIBIT "J". Form of Report used by Forest Officers.

I have not had an opportunity of studying that Statement of Causes but I understand that it sets out the causes of Forest fires during the last seven years where it has been possible to ascertain them.
THE COMMISSIONER: A multiplicity of causes is set forth in the statement.
MR. GOWANS: It attributes the responsibility to the various classes of people, graziers, hikers and so on, so far as it has been possible to do so. (To witness) I suppose that in the case of a large number of fires your officers are not in a position to indicate the cause with any certainty?—That is so. Those causes are generally designated "unknown".
THE COMMISSIONER: Does anybody desire to ask any questions - not so much by way of cross-examination but to elicit further information?
(To witness): I suppose that your officers necessarily act on what information they can gather. They would seldom assign the cause of the fires from direct observation?—It would be seldom from direct observation.
With forest officers about, I suppose people would be very careful?—Undoubtedly. The forest officers rely on what they hear, their knowledge of the district, and the class of work that is going on in that particular district. For example, a stream may be frequented by fishermen and others. Every outbreak of fire is reported whether it is large or small. It is part of your duty to make those reports?—Yes.
Do you know what was the general tendency of these fires - the general physical direction during January? Can you say whether the prevailing tendency was for them to burn in a southerly direction assisted by a north winds, or something of that sort?—The start of the disastrous fires occurred on January 8th. The fire started and was driven by a north-westerly wind which changed to a westerly and later to a south-westerly driving the fires
in a more or less northerly direction. On the following
day the wind changed to a northerly one and the main bulk of
of the damage was done by fires driven by northerly winds.
Were there various outbreaks in different parts of the State at or
about the same time?—There were numerous outbreaks.
Many of them leading to the large fire which would no doubt join with
some other fire as it started?—That undoubtedly happened.
Where were the first outbreaks reported from?—The fire which may be
called the forerunner of the most disastrous fire occurred in
the Toolangi district just north of Healesville. It originated
in the vicinity of the township of Kinglake. That fire
commenced on 1st January and was confined over the next two
days to private property. It then entered the Forest reserve—it
started west of the reserve and then entered the reserve.
It was held under control until the 8th January when under the
influence of a very strong north-westerly wind it got out of
control. By reason of the wind changing to west and south-
west that fire then burned in a northerly direction through
the Black Range country towards Yea.
It burned with a general northerly trend?—Yes.
Is that the fire which ultimately reached Narbethong?—Yes.
Would you say that this fire which commenced in the Toolangi district
was the fire which went across country and swept Narbethong?—I
would say that it was probably the fire which swept Narbethong,
the township of Healesville and the Acheron Way.
That was one of the first, if not the first, outbreak of a serious
nature that was reported?—Yes.
Were there any other serious fires in that vicinity?—Yes. About
3 o'clock on the afternoon of Sunday 8th January another
fire started on the Yea road near the township of Glenburn.
It was driven by a south-westerly wind and joined up with
the main fire which was further inland. It was travelling roughly in a northerly direction.

You are now talking about the area shown here (indicating on map)??-
It is the northern part of the circular coloured piece at the left. It is approximately the centre of the map.

Were there any other serious outbreaks?---Serious outbreaks occurred in the Rubicon forest. One fire in that reserve was undoubtedly caused by lightning, but that fire was brought under control. The fire from the Toolangi side burned the intervening country and it is quite possible that a spark from it may have jumped into the Rubicon and set it aflame. On the other hand, there may have been other fires which came from the north and joined up with the fire caused by lightning to devastate the whole of that region.

Does that exhaust that district?---No, there is another one. A fire burnt from roughly about the township of Warburton proceeding along the Yarra Valley to the place known as McVeigh's

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 11.)
On Friday the 13th January it was driven by a northerly wind. That fire swept south through the Noojee country. That is a pretty large area. At the same time fires were burning in the country surrounding Erica and the Aberfeldie River Valley. Those had been burning for some few days, and although they were under control they were not out. They were driven by the high winds for the whole of that week from the 8th to the 15th January. A considerable amount of damage was done in that region. Those are the only regions I am able to give information on at present.

THE COMMISSIONER: You cannot tell me anything about the country north of Maffra?—No, I cannot.

Can you give any information about the Bright-Omeo section that is marked on the map?—Our indications are that a considerable number of fires had been burning in that area for a considerable period, and were doing comparatively little damage until such time as the high winds rose, when they were driven by a fierce gale when there was a considerable amount of damage to both Crown lands and private property.

The culmination of their destructive force being about Friday the 13th January?—Yes, about Friday the 13th.

Can you tell the Commission anything about the part marked "Upper Murray"?—No, I am not conversant with that.

There is a smaller area—the Oxley district?—That is in the region of Mansfield.

Would they be bush fires or grass fires?—Bush fires mainly. It burnt over a considerable area of forest land and at times was dangerous to forest settlements; but generally it was confined to the forest land. It burnt with a severe intensity.

Then, of course, there is the western side of Victoria, in the Otway Forest?—Unfortunately serious fires occurred as late as
yesterday in the Otway district and our reports are necessarily very incomplete at the present time.

To summarise your evidence on one point, would it be correct to say that in some cases these fires had been burning for some degree of time before their cumulation on Friday the 13th?—That is correct.

I am not taking this as conclusive evidence, because I hope to get evidence from perhaps eye-witnesses; but are you in a position to tell the Commission to what causes your Department assign these outbreaks? Do you know how they were originally lit; for instance, you have stated that one was kindled by heavy lightning?—The fire which I term the Toolangi fire started on on private property in the vicinity of the township of Kinglake. At this stage I am not prepared to submit causes for the remainder of the fires.

In your experience are any appreciable proportion of the fires which break out in this State caused by what one might term natural causes and not by human agency?—A very low percentage are caused by natural agencies.

It is generally the human agency responsible?—Absolutely.

We have read a number of controversies in certain papers and magazines about a piece of glass causing fires. Have you had any scientific advice on that question?—I have had no scientific advice, but I know of no proven case where glass has caused a fire.

Have you considered the question of spontaneous combustion - whatever that may mean?—I have no evidence to offer on that point, except my own observations.

What have they led you to believe?—In the higher elevations where the debris and humus growth on the ground is densest and thickest are the places where one would expect fires if they were caused by spontaneous combustion, yet we find
that those places are the areas in which fires occur the least. They are the least accessible to mankind, I suppose?—Not necessarily the least accessible.

But the least frequented?—Yes, the least frequented.

I want you gentlemen, in addition to Mr. Gowans, to understand this is mere prima facie evidence. I am not belittling the evidence of the witness but necessarily it is not that of an eye-witness of anything that happened. These are mere theories being put forward at the moment. I was an eye-witness of the Toolangi fire, and took part in it.

I am talking more now about your general statements about general causes?—Yes.

Can you tell the Commission in what way the Toolangi fire commenced; you have told us it was on private property. Do you know how it was ignited?—No.

Did you see the outbreak on private property?—I traced it back to private property. I did not see it commence.

How far was it from any human habitation, whether tent, house, or otherwise?—There were quite a few scattered houses in the path of the fire.

What sort of property was it, a big or a small holding?—A comparatively small holding.

I am not going to ask you for any names at the moment; you can speak quite openly. What would be the area of the holding to which the fire was traced?—Probable about 50 or 60 acres.

Was there a house or any building on it?—No.

A tent or camp?—No, no habitation of any kind.

Was it scrub or bush country?—Scrub country.

Can you say what had been the state of the scrub before the fire commenced there; was it over-grown or sparse?—It was over-grown and very dense.

Do you know to what use it was ordinarily put?—Possibly a little rough grazing.
It was private property?—Yes.

I presume there are police inquiries proceeding concerning the origin of that fire?—Yes.

MR. GOWANS: How did you trace the Toolangi fire back to its source on that private property? Was it your own observation or from what you heard?—By simply tracing the area which was burnt back to its starting point taking the prevailing wind into account.

Would it have been possible for it to have started on an adjoining property and to have been burnt back to the source that you ascribe to it?—It is possible but highly improbable.

Why do you say it was improbable? I only want to get your reasons?—Because the wind was taking the fire from its starting point in the direction which we followed. The wind was in such a direction that it would be more or less impossible for the fire to burn back the opposite direction.

Was the point you fixed as the source of the fire well inside that private property or near the boundary?—Near the boundary.

How far in from the boundary?—Practically right on the boundary, and that block of private property is joining other private properties. It is very hard to fix the boundaries of private properties in such country.

Assuming it did pass out of that property did it pass through further private property?—Through further private property and a small portion of unoccupied Crown lands towards the vicinity of the township of Toolangi.

Were those unoccupied Crown lands under the control of anybody or any authority, or would they be under the control of the Lands Department?—They are under the control of the Lands Department.

Is that unoccupied land forest country?—It is timbered country.

THE COMMISSIONER: What is the distinction between forest country and timbered country?—I will not draw a distinction; it was not first class forest country.
MR. GOWANS: It was not a reserve forest; it was not a protected forest within the meaning of the Forests Act?—All Crown lands are protected forests. It was not a reserve forest.

If it had been a reserve forest it would have been vested in the Forests Commission?—That is so.

But a protected forest can be vested by the Crown in different ways?—That is so. The only control the Forests Commission has over Crown lands is the right to utilise the timber that is growing on that land.

Has the Forests Commission any power to take precautionary measures to protect forests by burning off or otherwise clearing?

THE COMMISSIONER: That may be a question of law; you may ask the practice.

MR. GOWANS: Do you know the practice?—Generally the practice is to confine our attention to the areas definitely under our control, for the simple reason that Crown lands may be alienated at any time.

When you say areas under your control, do you mean reserve forests only?—Reserved forests.

I think you left out one date which might be of assistance. Do you know the date of the Rubicon fire?—I think that occurred on the 10th January.

I notice that in the maps which have been produced there is no reference to the Dromana or Frankston fires; why would that be?—The duty of the Forests Commission is to control its own estates. We are not the fire wardens for the whole of the State of Victoria. May we take it these maps only refer to such fires as threatened the areas under the control of the Forests Commission?—Threatened or destroyed.

Do you know of any serious fires other than the ones you have set out on these maps?—I have heard of others.

Can you tell the Commission what you have heard? We know of the
Dromana and Frankston fires; do you know of any others?—

The township of Warrandyte?

Are there any around Ballarat?—I could not answer that question.

I see Colac is not included in the area marked in purple?—I under-

stand there were quite considerable grass fires in the vicinity

of Colac, which I understand caused a certain number of deaths.

You cannot tell the Commission of any others of a serious nature which

would not be set out on these maps?—No, I do not know of any oth-

ers.

MR. KELSO: Could the witness tell the Commission about the area covered

by that fire when he saw it first, and when he traced it back

to this private property - the Toolangi fire?

THE COMMISSIONER: Did you see the fire while it was in progress, or

when did you see it?—I saw the fire from the 6th January

until the 9th January;

MR. KELSO: That would be five days after it started?—Yes, five days

after it started.

Can you say about what size it was then? The question leads to how

easy or difficult it would be to see how the fire did originate

if it covered square miles at the time?—When I first saw it

the fire was burning only in forest land and it covered an area

of forest land approximately 500 or 600 acres at that particular

time. It was burning on a very small front, possibly half a

mile wide; and it remained burning like that until Sunday the

8th when it became out of control. I had previously inspected

the whole of the area burnt over a week prior to New Year's Day.

From my knowledge of the country when it was unburnt and after

it was burnt I was able to follow the course of that fire.

At that time when you had personal contact with the fire, what steps
were being taken, and by whom to put it out?—Steps were being taken by the resident district officer at Toolangi and his crew of men assisted by myself and another officer.

THE COMMISSIONER: Would you give us his name and whereabouts?—Unfortunately the two officers assisting me were burnt to death.

MR. KELSO: Did they have any luck in getting that fire out? Was the fire virtually extinguished and merely smouldering?—No, it beat us because of a high wind.

On the 6th?—No, on the 8th.

I meant on the 6th?—On the 6th the fire was causing us not much anxiety.

MR. SWINDON: Have you ever known a fire being caused by friction, such as the limbs of trees rubbing together?—No, I have no personal knowledge of that.

THE COMMISSIONER: Have you any credible information on the point?—No.

MR. SWINDON: You mentioned the fire at Kinglake started in private property and you said it was under control; is there any bush fire brigade in that district?—To the best of my knowledge, no.

THE COMMISSIONER: You might give the Secretary, if you have them available, the names of one or two of the crew who were with those officers who were burnt to death?—Very well.

THE WITNESS WITHDREW.

MR. GOWANS: I had hoped to have available this afternoon some evidence from the Meteorological Bureau about the temperatures during January, the humidity and prevailing winds. However, owing to the short space of time they had to get that information ready I am afraid that will not be available this afternoon. It may be recorded at the next sitting of the Commission. I have no further evidence I can tender.
THE COMMISSIONER: It is now proposed the next evidence called should be on Thursday next.

MR. GOWANS: I understand that that is so.

THE COMMISSIONER: Who is that evidence called by and what will be the nature of that evidence?

MR. STONEHILL: Mr. Quinn of the Hardwood Millers' Association. It will be evidence by millers in the areas devastated by the fire as to the effects of the fire in their districts, and it will probably cover other ground as well.

MR. SWINDON: The Bush Fire Brigades Executive is formulating its case next Tuesday, and it will be ready on Wednesday of next week. There will be some details and suggestions for the prevention of fires.

THE COMMISSIONER: I do not know what course we are going to take. I do not suppose you gentlemen will find it convenient to become camp followers and follow this Commission around the country side. However, I can give you the assurance that if you have evidence to call a time will be made so that you will be duly heard. I think perhaps the best thing would be to keep in touch with the Secretary or Mr. Gowans on the matter. I am anxious to get on to the sites and obtain evidence from people closely associated with the disaster. At the moment, not having given it much thought I think perhaps your evidence would be better later on when we have had a chance to see what has happened.

MR. SWINDON: We will be prepared any time after Tuesday next. If we receive due notice we will have the necessary evidence ready.

MR. GOWANS: I suggest if any of these bodies represented here today have the names of firsthand witnesses in any of the areas they might get in touch with the Secretary and let him know their names and addresses.

THE COMMISSIONER: If you have evidence of a first hand nature the
Commission would be obliged if you would indicate the names of the witnesses, and the general trend of their evidence, to the Secretary. If any of you who wish to have a copy of the Commission issued to me Mr. Carbines will make it available for the purpose of having it copied.

MR. GOWANS: I suggest the Commission might occupy itself on a private sitting tomorrow and if other evidence was available we would go ahead on Thursday. We could take the evidence of the Weather Bureau and the witnesses called by the Hardwood Miller's Association. After that I suppose it would depend on what evidence is available.

THE COMMISSIONER: We will adjourn the public sitting of this Commission until Thursday of this week.

MR. GOWANS: I have just been informed there is somebody from the Weather Bureau here now and the Commission may possibly take some evidence before the adjournment.

THE COMMISSIONER: Very well.

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JAMES CHARLES FOLEY, Sworn and Examined:

MR. GOWANS: What is your full name?—James Charles Foley and I am an officer of the Meteorological Bureau, the supervising Meteorologist.

Have you some information to furnish to the Commission with regard to the temperatures throughout the State of Victoria in the month of January?—Yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: Have you that set out in written form?—I have it partly in written form. I should explain I had to come at very short notice and I did not have time to get things ready properly. I have copies of the daily 9 a.m. reports for Victorian stations which I produce.

THE COMMISSIONER: We do not want the whole of Victoria.

MR. GOWANS: I suppose they are all together?—Yes. I have temperatures for Melbourne, not particular areas.

19

FOLEY.
THE COMMISSIONER: By whom are those copies compiled?—By officers on the staff, from telegraphic reports received in the morning of each day. These I produce are copies of weather bulletins for Victoria and they commence on January 7th and go on to January 14th inclusive.

MR. GOWANS: Are there any other reports for January prior to the 7th and subsequent to the 14th?—I could get them, but I did not think the Commission would require them.

MR. GOWANS: I will now put in the copies of the weather bulletin for Victoria from the Commonwealth Meteorological Bureau from January 7th until January 14th inclusive.

.........EXHIBIT "K".................Copies of Weather Bulletin,

WITNESS: I produce our rainfall maps showing monthly rainfall from July 1938 to December 1938 which are put in to show those months have been exceptionally dry.

THE COMMISSIONER: Do they only give the particular information about those months?—Yes. They show a comparison with the average of previous years.

Do you say in general terms it is a very dry season?—Yes.

From what time of last year, that is 1938, did it become manifest we were going to have a very dry season?—Putting it in those terms, we cannot tell in advance. These reports show from July onwards it was very dry. There is also a map for the year 1938 showing it was a very dry year compared with normal years.

Was it very dry in comparison?—Exceptionally dry. We have not worked out comparisons for the particular areas covered by the fires, but in some parts of the State it was the driest on record for the three months, September, October, November.

Taking the north and north-east of the State, does that general statement you have made apply there, that it was one of the driest on record?—I should say it was one of the driest on record,
MR. GOWANS: The Commission may desire these records which contain general statements of weather over Victoria for the year 1938. The Commission may desire to have a general resume of that.

THE COMMISSIONER: Yes, I think that may be put in.

THE WITNESS: This statement produced is only written in lead pencil and perhaps in that form it may not be acceptable.

THE COMMISSIONER: That is all right, as long as it is legible? With regard to the average day to day maximum temperatures at Melbourne from about the 21st December until the end of January, it shows in particular the high readings of the 8th, 10th and 13th.

Is that in Melbourne alone? Yes. The readings of the 10th and 13th were the highest on record for Melbourne, and it may be presumed the temperatures recorded in the bush fire areas were correspondingly higher than in other years.

MR. GOWANS: That may be put in for what it is worth as giving some general indication.

THE COMMISSIONER: Very well.

EXHIBIT "M". Day to day maximum temperatures at Melbourne on 21st December until the end of January.

THE WITNESS: The other documents I have are all official records, of which those documents I produce are copies. I brought the official records for reference, if necessary.

THE COMMISSIONER: We will not trouble about those. Mr. Gowans, is there anything in those records you want to bring before the Commission?

MR. GOWANS: I have not seen them.

THE COMMISSIONER: I think the witness has proved it was very dry and very hot.

MR. GOWANS: Have you any information with regard to the humidity in
January?---I have not those here but I could produce them if required. Could you furnish that information by Thursday?---Yes.

I understand the question of humidity has a lot to do with the outbreak of fires. Can you give the Commission any information of the prevailing winds over Victoria through January?---Unfortunately our records of winds are very incomplete. All I can really give the Commission is the record of winds at Melbourne, except what are shown at 9 a.m. on those reports, that is, the daily Bulletins.

THE COMMISSIONER: That will not help us very much. Taking the first half of January, speaking generally, what was the general tendency and force of the winds in Victoria?---Moderate, mainly light to moderate.

In what direction?---From what I remember of it there was a preference of southerlies - bursting into northerlies just on those few hot days.

MR. GOWANS: I presume we will be able to obtain that information locally?

MR. GOWANS: Yes. (To witness): Would you mind letting me see those official records to see if there is anything of value there?---These are daily rainfalls, they are the basis of the maps?---Yes, the others are curves of temperature and barometric pressure. I brought them for reference really.

THE COMMISSIONER: Very well, we will not require those.

THE WITNESS WITHDREW.

THE COMMISSIONER: The public sitting of this Commission stands adjourned until 10 o'clock on Thursday next.