

FIVE KILLED IN EXPLOSION AT COOTHARABA SAWMILL

In one of the worst disasters in the history of Noosa Shire, five men were fatally injured when a boiler exploded in the Lake Cootharaba sawmill on Tuesday, July 29, 1873.

The mill was situated near the present location of Boreen Point tourist resort. All of the men were unmarried. Death came to them with only a brief warning as they warmed themselves before the boiler at 8.30 on that chilly winter morning. When part of the boiler plate began to bulge, they ran for safety - but the shattering explosion overtook them.

Charles Longg was killed almost instantly. Nearly every bone in his body was broken, and the blast tore off all his clothing. Patrick Tierney, Joseph White, and Phelim Molloy died within a few days. Patrick Molloy, a brother of the latter victim, lingered until September 10 when he died in the Gympie hospital from scalds which had given him agony. A piece of flying boiler plate sheared off Phelim Molloy's leg at the ankle. Two amputations of the limb by Drs Doudney and Benson failed to save his life. Tragically, a third Molloy brother had been killed by a boiler explosion at Maryborough only a few months previously. A magisterial inquiry was held by Mr J.C. Bligh, P.M., at Cootharaba the day after the tragedy.

The explosion was heard three miles away, and wrecked the boiler room. Henry Hatch was sharpening a saw frame in the engine room only eight feet away when the blast occurred. When the steam cleared, he rushed from the room to aid the injured men. Phelim Molloy was standing on one leg, his other ankle only a bleeding stump. White and Tierney were laying prostrate near the boiler, which had moved a distance of about 15 feet. Long muttered a few words and died. He had been denuded of all clothing except his belt and leather pouch. All five men were severely scalded. The mill was operated by McGhie, Luya and Co.

The manager, Thomas Bartholomew, deposed that the boiler should have withstood a pressure of 45 to 50 lb. of steam to the square inch. It had been tested successfully at 50 lb. pressure in January. Bartholomew said he believed the boiler had been weakened by a manhole door in the plate at the chimney end. Half the plate had been blown away from the stays. John Woodburn, a member of the firm, testified that he recognised only Phelim Molloy after the explosion as the others were badly disfigured by scald wounds.

Engine driver, James Trussell, said that he pumped up both boilers and left the furnace doors open before going to breakfast just after 8 a.m. The steam pressure then was 32 lb. Trussell said that he had cleaned out the boiler six or seven weeks previously and considered it to be in fair working order. One of the Molloys had told him that, two or three minutes before the blast, the gauge showed 43 lb. of steam.

Trussell expressed the opinion that the plate at the chimney end of the boiler had always been defective. John Murray, a Government inspector of marine boilers, was in the locality at the time to examine the boiler of the steamer Elandra. He told the inquiry of his examinations of the wrecked sawmill boiler. Half of one end was blown away and the flue was driven down. This end, he believed, had been in a bad condition for some time.

Murray strongly recommended that every boiler in the colony should be fitted with a Government safety valve. A final impious twist of fate rang down the curtain on the episode - the hearse bearing Patrick Molloy's body overturned on the way to the cemetery.

Extract from "THE GYMPIE TIMES" 16 August, 1955.