Mt Kembla Mine Disaster 31 July 1902
compiled by Carol Herben

This July 31st marks the centenary of the Mt Kembla Mine Disaster, where 96 men and boys lost their lives in the explosion.

On 23 March 1887 some 15 years and 4 months earlier the first major mine disaster struck the Illawarra region with the Bulli Mine Disaster which claimed the lives of 81 men and boys. A leader in that rescue campaign was one Henry Osborne MacCabe a young man of 30 years and a mining engineer. Amongst the many rescuers were John Evans, Manager of Mt Kembla Colliery, and W. B. Green a former manager at Mt Kembla Colliery.

Both mine disasters devastated many families. One was the Walker family of Cordeaux River. In the Bulli Mine Disaster William Walker, aged 40 years, and both his stepsons, George and Henry Cole, were killed. In the Mt Kembla Mine Disaster William's brother Richard Walker, aged 45 years, along with Richard's two nephews, John, aged 16 years, and William, aged 18 years, became victims of the worst civil disaster in Australian history. The following are extracts from The Illawarra Mercury at that time.

**Dreadful Explosion at Mount Kembla.**

The Illawarra Mercury 2 August, 1902.

A gloom was cast over the whole district on Thursday, 31st July last, when it became known that a dreadful colliery explosion had taken place at Mount Kembla a few minutes before 2 o'clock at a time when there were upwards of 250 men in the mine. The explosion resulted in the roof of the mine tunnel collapsing and imprisoning the men. The explosion so far as is known at present killed 57 men outright. The names of the men whose bodies were last recovered had not come to hand.

The townspeople of Wollongong were thrown into a state of great excitement. A terrific report was heard, the windows of the houses rattled, and for a moment the people stood aghast wondering what had happened. Many attributed the noise to an extra large blast at Port Kembla quarry, while others in the town state that they distinctly noticed smoke and debris being blown upwards from Mount Kembla.
There was, however, an almost unanimous opinion that some dreadful disaster had occurred in one or other of the mines. All doubt was very shortly removed by a telephone message received at the Wollongong Post Office. It was a brief statement to the effect that a dreadful explosion had occurred in the mine, and it was feared all the men had been entombed. At once there was a great commotion especially amongst those who had relatives working in the colliery. Business was suspended immediately, and in a few minutes vehicles of all description loaded with people, also horsemen and pedestrians, were hurrying towards the mine.

FIRST RECEIPT OF THE NEWS IN TOWN.

News of the disaster was first received at the Arbitration Court, sitting in Wollongong, on the dispute existing between the Southern Collieries proprietors and their employees. It was received by Mr W Rogers, manager of the Mount Kembla mine. The court at once adjourned and the managers of the different coal mines hurried away with Mr Rogers to assist in the rescue of the unfortunate miners. The miners representative present in court also joined in the humane effort of lending assistance to the men in distress.

ARRIVAL AT THE INCLINE.

When Mr Rogers and his fellow mine managers reached the bottom of the incline leading up to the mine they learned that the explosion had been a disastrous one. A fireman named Weston was met with his head bandaged. On being interrogated as to the nature of the accident, he said it was very serious, and that it was a gas explosion. On reaching the mouth of the tunnel Mr Rogers and the other mine managers found that the volumes of smoke had died away almost to nothing.

RELIEF PARTIES.

Relief parties were at once formed of willing hands from other mines, whilst civilians who were not miners cordially joined in the work. Amongst those who assisted was Major MacCabe, former manager of the Mount Keira mine. He took a prominent part in the rescue work at the Bulli disaster, and was again to the front with his advise and assistance. It was gleaned from Weston that he was working at his usual place with Engine-Driver Purcell when the explosion occurred. Both had a miraculous escape. Weston was practically uninjured, but his mate was blown clear out of the engine house. He escaped with a few bruises. A lad named Nelson standing near Weston, was knocked down and killed instantly.
TERRIBLE SCENES OF DEVASTATION.

At the tunnel mouth a terrible scene of devastation was presented to view. All the buildings, including the office, engine house, and every other building in connection with the colliery, had been blown into an unrecognisable mass. The entrance to the main shaft was a complete wreck. Gangs of men were set to work to clear away the debris for the twofold purpose of enabling the rescue parties to get into the mine, and to also ascertain if anyone lay killed or injured under the mass of timber and rocks strewn about. In a very short time the body of the lad Nelson was found in a badly mutilated condition. A few minutes later a gruesome discovery was made in the shape of a human leg lying under a heap of timber. As the body of Nelson was not minus one leg the limb belonged to some other unfortunate youth, as the doctors noted that it was the leg of a youth of 17 or 18 years of age.

RESCUE WORK

As the work of clearing away the debris at the entrance tunnel proceeded the rescue parties were taken to the travelling road, which is a small tunnel 200 yards to the south of the main tunnel and is used for the purpose of enabling the miners to proceed to the different workings in the mine. Fortunately this travelling road was not damaged by the explosion and after several attempts the willing hands were able to go into the mine. Safety lamps were carried. That was insisted on by the manager though the mine had been worked with naked lights. It was heartbreaking to witness the grief of the women and children. "Here they come" shouted someone who was peering in at the mouth of the tunnel, and in a moment several more were helped out staggering and in a dazed condition. The crowd of women and children pressed round to see if amongst the number was their father, husband, or brother as the case might be. Some of the men, on reaching the open air became delirious, and showed the terrible ordeal through which they passed. Some of them could not walk even when supported by the rescuers. Hence they had to be brought out on stretcher.

THE MEN IN THE MINE

At the time of the catastrophe there were over 250 men in the mine, the front shift was just coming out at the time of the explosion, in fact they did
not know that anything out of the common had occurred until they emerged from the travelling road and saw a great crowd of men, women and children gathering there. It is a singular circumstance that an explosion heard nine miles away was not even heard or felt by the miners who were leaving off work. In a conversation with some of the men who were rescued it was learned that their first sensation was a sense of deafness and a feeling of suffocation. Some stated that they were knocked down as if by a blow their lights were blown out by the fierce rush of wind. In each case the miner stated that he felt almost choked to death with smoke. The only way they escaped suffocation was by lying flat on the ground and crawled along on their hands and knees towards a place called the "air reserve" and waited there until the smoke had cleared away. One of the great dangers which confronted the men was the manner in which the skips were hurled about in the workings by a mighty rush of air caused by the explosion. In some cases the skips were smashed to pieces, and the horses that drew them were killed instantly.

CAUSE OF THE EXPLOSION.
The general impression is that the explosion was due to gas. The remarkable thing is that gas has never been known to exist in the mine before. The fireman and tester, whose duty it is to make an inspection of all the tunnels in search of gas, went all over the workings that morning, and they failed to find any trace of gas. One of the men was missing and was supposed to have been left in the mine.

The Late H. O. MacCabe.
The South Coast Times 9 August 1902.
The loss of Major Henry Osborne MacCabe has been a great grief to the Illawarra. Perhaps no man had in same degree the esteem of the people of this district. He was a man of high character, and he possessed eminently the qualities of a leader. He followed the profession of his father, the late F. P. MacCabe, that of a surveyor, and spent some time in England serving an apprenticeship to colliery engineering and management. After his return from England he took up the position of his father as manager of the Mt Keira mine, which he held till the property passed out of the possession of Captain Osborne. Mr MacCabe then migrated to Western Australia and after spending a year or two there returned to this State and settled to work in his profession, being frequently employed in
surveying in this district. He was a native of Wollongong and was 45 years of age. Mrs MacCabe who was a daughter of the late Dean Ewing, Church of England incumbent here, has a family of three, a son and two daughters, to share her loss and sorrow.

Mr MacCabe did his share in public affairs. He was a member of both the North Illawarra and the Wollongong Councils, serving two terms as Mayor of the latter, was a Harbour Trust Commissioner, and commandant of the military forces of the South Coast district, his soldierly abilities being highly appreciated at headquarters. He was a man of deep religious sentiment, and held office in St Michael's Church of England. Many memorials have lately been raised to South African soldiers, but Mr MacCabe has a higher claim to such distinction than any of these, and Illawarra would do well to commemorate in some form, the life and death of this noble hero.

"One who was there" writes:- I was one of the first persons on the scene of the disaster and remained there until the late Major entered on what proved to be his last journey into the mine. Consequently, I had every opportunity of witnessing all that was going on around. Head and shoulders, he was, above everyone in organising matters, outside and inside the mine. Early in the afternoon he arranged squads to take up duty with the stretchers, directed operations in removing the debris and making preparations for the sufferers then being brought out. That task accomplished, he went in again and again with parties. His great care during the early part of the night was to prevent irresponsible parties, armed with naked lights, from rushing to their doom. Of the good work accomplished by him in the mine, Messrs. Cook, Ritchie, and others testify. Cool, collected, and calculating throughout the whole deeds accomplished by him on that eventful night can never be too thoroughly appreciated. Peace to his ashes!

The funeral took place on Sunday afternoon, and was a military one - with all its pomp and circumstance. The body lay in state, all day on Sunday at the Artillery orderly-room, surrounded by a bank of wreaths. During the day a steady stream of callers reverently passed in and out to look for the last time on the face of the fallen hero. At 2 o'clock sharp the mourners were marshalled by Superintendent Brennan and Captain Kyngdon. Nearly every regiment in the State was represented, prominent amongst the military present being Brigadier-General Finn G. O. C., Major Holman A. D. C. (representing the Governor). A nicely worded message of condolence was sent from Melbourne by General Hutton. The funeral procession was headed by the members of the local Artillery, with reversed arms and accompanied by the Royal Artillery Band playing Chopin's solemnly sweet funeral march. Then came a car bearing the wreaths, followed by the gun carriage, on which the polished cedar casket (covered by the Union Jack)
was borne. Then followed the chief mourners and military men, behind whom were the general public, including representatives of the Federal and State Parliaments, the various Councils and public bodies. After passing from Market Street into Corrimal Street, the funeral turned into Crown Street (meeting there a Kembla funeral) thence into Kembla Street, and again into Market Street, halting at St Michael's Church. The coffin was carried by eight men of the deceased officer's regiment into the sacred edifice. The interior of the church was sombrely draped. The service was conducted by the Rector (Rev. G. D'Arcy Irvine) who paid an eloquent tribute to the life and labors of the late Major. The sad procession was then re-formed and wended its way slowly to the Wollongong general cemetery. The roadside from the Artillery office to the cemetery was lined with people, while at the graveside several thousands had been assembled. After the coffin had been lowered, a firing party of 84 discharged three farewell volleys. The last solemn graveside rites prescribed by the Church of England were conducted by the Rev. D'Arcy Irvine.

**The Brave William McMurray.**

*Illawarra Mercury* 6 August 1902.

Whilst the extremely solemn and never-to-be forgotten scene was being enacted in Wollongong in connection with the burial of Major MacCabe with Military honours as a great hero as that officer, but in a humbler sphere of life was laid to rest in the Church of England Cemetery* (sic) at Mount Kembla. It was William McMurray the deputy who along with Major MacCabe was the first to rush into the mine to try to save life. The tragic death of both men will long be remembered. They stuck to each other, and when subsequently discovered were found to be locked in each other's arms. The remains of the deceased were followed to the grave by a large number of mourners, and the service was one that deeply impressed the spectators.

A number of members of the Bismarck Lodge (Protestant Alliance Friendly Society) of which the deceased had been a member for many years were present in regalia, several of the number acting as bearers in conveying the deceased brother to the grave.

*William McMurray was buried at the new Windy Gully Cemetery. (Ed)*

**The Miners Funerals.**

*The Illawarra Mercury* 6 August, 1902.

Simultaneously with the burial of Major MacCabe, another similar sad ceremony took place in the RC cemetery, where the miners T. (J) Ryan, T. Egan, P. McCann, J. Murphy, E. McGill, W. Morris, G. Morris, M and E Gallagher were laid
in their last resting place. The scenes of anguish were enough to start a tear from the most stony hearted. These funerals were also headed by the local bands. The first funerals from the mountain did not arrive in Wollongong until dusk on Saturday evening, and the internments took place in the dark. Buggy lamps were brought into requisition, and by their aid the service was read by the Rev Fathers Byrne and Dunne.

The dead miners are buried at distances apart from one another. Some lie in Dapto others have been taken to Wollongong and others again lie in the local Church of England and Methodist grounds, the ministers officiating including Rev. Messrs Hunt, Blackett, Willard and Thomas. A goodly few rest together in a new cemetery in the Cordeaux Road. Never in the history of the world probably has a cemetery been initiated, designed, and put into practical use in so short a space of time. In an hour Dr. Robertson, who was accompanied by Mr A. Campbell MLA., the member for the district, was on the ground and rapidly planned it out. Sturdy miners set to work at once with pick and shovel, and almost in a flash of lightning, so as to say the virgin soil, was yawning with graves, one of these being 48 ft. long by 9ft wide. It is beautifully situated in a valley, and almost surrounded by the Cordeaux Heights. Funerals were also held in the new made ground on Sunday when the officiating ministers were; Mr T B Holmes, Mr R J Thomas, Mr T Daves (Methodist), and Mr C White and Mr Miller (Presbyterian). Upwards of 30 bodies were lowered. The large graves referred to was intended for "unclaimed" bodies of which there were at least a considerable number, but some were afterwards claimed, and only four unclaimed ones were interred.

The Mt Kembla Mine Disaster Commemoration Committee was formed in 2001. Many events are planned from 31st July commencing with the 2pm Church Service and concluding on 3rd August. Mt Kembla Village will turn back the clock with many games, exhibitions, events and demonstration of old crafts. Anyone interested is quite welcome to attend. If any person has a direct ancestral line to any of the miners whose life was taken that fateful day, or anyone who had lost a family member in the Mt Kembla Colliery can contact Cate Stevenson (Secretary) Mt Kembla Mine Disaster Commemoration Committee, 9 Araluen Avenue, Mt. Kembla Village. 2526.