

WESTON CREEK COMMUNITY COUNCIL

- Your Local Voice -

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"Firestorm Alley"

The following information was received from a resident of Weston Creek. It is published with permission and due acknowledgment.

Jeff Carl
Chairperson, Weston Creek Community Council

Mr Jeff Carl
Weston Creek Community Council

Dear Mr Carl,

Spatial Plan – Stromlo region

In view of the Spatial Plan proposal for a residential area around Mt Stromlo, I feel that the research listed below should be considered. I feel that history speaks for itself.

Only the larger fires affecting the Stromlo or Woden region have been researched. There were quite probably many smaller ones.

27 December 1903 (Sunday)—Yarralumla Station (Holder) Fire

- Accidentally started from a burning log in a log fence adjoining Rolfe's Paddock, Yarralumla Station (now Holder) on a Sunday morning
- Log fences being burnt by stockmen – the fire was reputedly put out by the stockmen before leaving the area
- No fire break burnt on either side of the burning fence, grass was too green from recent rain to burn.
- Wind was due west, heavy wind, blowing off Mount Stromlo
- Destroyed 40 acres
- Solution – jury decision – more care to be taken when burning off. [\[1\]](#)

27 January 1926 (Friday)

- Began in the Cotter catchment area in country heavily grassed, timbered with stringy bark and gum, and carrying a thick undergrowth of dead tea-tree
- Bushfires raging on 5 mile front beyond the Murrumbidgee
- At 4.00am on 28 Jan, a westerly gale arose fire revived and drove the fire towards the Cotter and Murrumbidgee confluence and crossed the Murrumbidgee River[2]
- Pine plantations on north-west slope of Mt. Stromlo in grave danger
- Territory covered with a pall of smoke, region was tinder dry
- According to Prof. Duffield, of the Commonwealth Observatory: Stromlo observatory buildings were of solid concrete, with no wood and no inflammable material on the outside. It is likely therefore that little damage will be done, even if the fire sweeps up to the summit.
- Uriarra Homestead, barely saved.[3]
- Flames reached to within 100 yards of the historic homestead, Yarralumla
- Canberra enveloped in thick haze of acrid smoke –mountains obliterated
- Fire had a 20 mile front on 28 Jan.
- Flames reached the Uriarra Homestead fence
- Telephone communication between Canberra and the rest of the State was severed – all lines destroyed.[4]
- Main Equipment used - wet bags, broken branches of trees.[5]

11 September 1927 (Sunday)

- A fire burnt steadily on a hill near the Cotter River.
- Another bushfire destroyed 50 acres as it burnt towards Mt. Stromlo.
- Stromlo fire arrested on narrow firebreak adjoining the Stromlo Forest – once amongst the pines the fire could not have been checked until it had completely destroyed the forests.
- Abundant water was to hand in the reservoir on the summit of Mt Stromlo and with 1560 ft. of hose, the Canberra Fire Brigade, assisted by forest rangers, succeeded in checking the flames.[6]

13 January 1939 (Friday)

- Fires entered the southern parts of the Federal Territory from NSW grasslands late on Thursday[7]
- On Tuesday, 3 January, in the hills about 40 miles behind Uriarra Station— Uriarra damage est. £2,000, trucks driven into dam to save them
- Considered too far away to cause any danger
- Friday afternoon – fire borne on strong wind at breakneck speed, leapt from mountain top to mountain top
- Saturday – wind shifted – started new fires – frontage of 45 miles[8]
- Wind driven by south-westerly gale – fire covered an area extending from Yass to Canberra[9]
- Fire at Tidbinbilla – fire burnt to boundary of Tidbinbilla Station, buildings safe.
- All homesteads in Tidbinbilla saved. Congwarra lost 300 sheep.
- Fire neglected for 3 days
- Fire on a dozen fronts

- Fierce wind carried flames along gullies and depressions at amazing speed
- Burning tinder carried 5-6 miles by wind
- Burnt leaves from Uriarra fell on Parliament House at 11 a.m., Saturday
- Pine plantation at Uriarra-Cotter Valley almost completely burnt out - £300,000 pines destroyed
- Raged along Murrumbidgee – by lunchtime, Saturday, fire had a strong hold and constituted a danger to Canberra as it crossed at several points close to Canberra on Saturday afternoon
- Two serious fires started near Mt Stromlo on Huntly Station and 15 miles further along at Kurrajong where Mr GE Brown's homestead was threatened
- Fire at Huntly started from a spark carried 6 miles from Uriarra fire
- Women and children evacuated from Mt Stromlo on Saturday afternoon
- Fire got to within 2 miles of Mt Stromlo[\[10\]](#)
- Wind dropped on Saturday, after sundown, and crisis passed[\[11\]](#)
- Fires elsewhere – on Black Mountain and on two fronts near Hall – entire western side of the Murrumbidgee to Wee Jasper, including the Mullion was burnt out[\[12\]](#)
- Lack of adequate organization in Canberra revealed for combating bushfires
- Police Station developed as central base for assigning men[\[13\]](#)
- Governor-General, Lord Gowrie, spent most of the day moving from place to place among the volunteers[\[14\]](#)

25 January 1952 (Thursday)

- Weather forecast, 25 Jan: fine and very hot with strong gusty north-westerly winds – cooler change with light rain and thunderstorms in the early evening – temperature 67 to 102 deg.F.
- 12 fires on a 25 mile front in the ranges (rough country) beyond Brindabella, about 30 miles from Canberra – Fire control Officer, CR Cole, stated that if the fires linked up, the threat would be as real as the big blaze of 1939 in the same area
- There was no suggestion that the fires had been deliberately lit
- Pine plantations valued at more than £1,500,000 threatened
- Bush fire brigades from Mt Stromlo, Pierces Creek, Uriarra kept a strict watch on the fire along the Cotter Road.
- Sparks from smouldering trees carried by gusty winds in the afternoon
- The fire along the Cotter Road was brought under control on Wednesday and kept in check – due the efficiency and co-ordination of bush fire brigades, departmental and private fire fighting units.

25 January 1952 (Friday)

- Major fire commenced in the Yarralumla area behind the cemetery, about 9.30 am
- Gale force wind of 55 miles an hour
- 200 sq. miles of grassland and timbered country in the ACT, including portions of Red Hill, Mugga Hill, Narrabundah and Tuggeranong, burnt.
- Fires checked in the Royalla district, 18 miles from Canberra[\[15\]](#)
- 2 men died in the fire, one in Mugga Lane, and a stockman, RK Pettit, whose remains were found on the 'Woden' property on 11 February.[\[16\]](#)

5 February, 1952 (Tuesday)

- Bushfire swept Mt Stromlo on Tuesday afternoon – caused by a lightning flash
- Began approx. 1 mile from the junction of the Murrumbidgee and Molonglo rivers
- Buildings on Mt Stromlo drenched with water
- Women and children evacuated
- Fire roared up the slopes of the mountain
- Fire fighters amazed to see a ‘willie willie’ of flame rise 100 feet above the tree tops and travel quickly across the pines
- Observatory buildings and equipment valued at £50,000 and 100,00 pine trees destroyed
- Fire threatened sub-observatories established by the American Yale and Columbia universities
- North-west wind created flying sparks
- Force of approx. 800 volunteers and large numbers of fire fighting units gathered to fight the fire in the pine plantation – firebreaks were burnt
- Flames travelled around the mountain quickly, forcing fire fighters out of the plantation south of the entrance to the observatory
- Fire crossed the Cotter Road on the front of three-quarters of a mile.
- Fire extended for approx. a further mile, through the property of Mrs MG Fox, of ‘Avondale’ (now Holder) to cross Kambah Lane and extinguished on the property of ‘Weston’ (now Holder/Weston), approx. half a mile from an outbreak on Friday
- Fire was one of 10 outbreaks reported during the day^[17]
- Commonwealth Astronomer, Dr. R. v.de R. Woolley said after 26 Jan fires that he had made ‘certain recommendations’ regarding the pine trees near the Mt Stromlo Observatory, and those, if carried out, might have prevented much of the damage at the Observatory on Tuesday. The recommendations were made to the forestry authorities but ten days was not long enough for any action to be taken.^[18]

24 December 2001

- Fire on the ‘Huntly’ property, Uriarra Road.
- Fire at ‘Kallenia Rivers’, Coppins Crossing Road
- Huntly fire threatened the Mt Stromlo pine plantation, burnt out 64 hectares, and was halted 130 metres short of the pine plantation.
- Coppins Crossing fire spread down to the Molonglo River, crossed the river and burnt the Greenhills pine plantation – threatened Duffy, Holder, Weston, Yarralumla and Curtin to the Royal Australian Mint
- The two fires merged and became known as the Stromlo fire.
- At 4.00 pm – winds reported at 90 km per hour
- Five major fires reported between 24 Dec and 25 Dec, plus 33 minor fires^[19]

I cannot see any reasoning behind PALMs proposal for the Stromlo area. The majority of the large fires had their beginnings behind or around the Uriarra/Cotter area and were swept by gale force winds towards Mt Stromlo, Weston Creek or Woden. One fire, 11 Sep 1927, occurred in winter. It appears that PALM wishes to have a re-occurrence of the 18 January 2003 bushfire, for, if a residential area is built, what has happened in the past will happen again, and again. The Uriarra area is a wind corridor that drives any fire behind or around Uriarra towards Mt Stromlo and beyond.

Furthermore, history has also proved pine plantations to be absolutely vulnerable. Please note that in the 5 Feb 1952 fire, willie willie's of flames also occurred, as they did in the recent disaster.

If the entire area is left for grazing, we, living presently in the above areas, may have a better chance of survival. After researching the above, I am wondering why Weston Creek was built in the first place.

I also feel that the Weston Creek community should be made aware of the bushfire history of Weston Creek so that they may be able to formulate their own opinions and points of view.

Yours sincerely,

Patricia Frei, ADLAAH

Bibliography

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- [1] *Canberra Times*, Friday, 1 Jan, 1904.
 - [2] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 Jan 1926.
 - [3] *The Sun*, [Sydney], 28 Jan 1926.
 - [4] *The Sun*, [Sydney], 29 Jan 1926
 - [5] *Sunday Sun*, 31 Jan 1926.
 - [6] *The Canberra Times*, Tues., 13 Sep 1927.
 - [7] *Queanbeyan Age*, Tues., 17 Jan 1939.
 - [8] *The Canberra Times*, Mon., 16 Jan 1939.
 - [9] *Queanbeyan Age*, Tues., 17 Jan 1939.
 - [10] *The Canberra Times*, Mon., 16 Jan 1939.
 - [11] *Queanbeyan Age*, Tues., 17 Jan 1939.
 - [12] *Ibid.*
 - [13] *The Canberra Times*, Mon., 16 Jan 1939.
 - [14] *Goulburn Evening Penny Post*, Mon., 16 Jan 1939.
 - [15] *The Canberra Times*, Sat., 26 Jan 1952
 - [16] *Ibid.*, Mon., 28 Jan 1952.
 - [17] *Ibid.*, Wed., 6 Feb 1952.
 - [18] *Ibid.*, Thur., 7 Feb 1952.
 - [19] Christmas 2002, Bushfires in the ACT, website
http://www.esb.act.gov.au/firebreak/Xmas2001_article.html as viewed 24 May 2003.