

# #52 Ancestors 2020 Week 15 Fire

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#52 Ancestors 2020

Week 15 Fire

Last year (Week 28 – Reunion) I told the story of the 1915 fire at the Regatta Hotel in Brisbane which affected my great grandfather, James Gleeson, and his family. James was the licensee of the Regatta at the time of the fire and his family had to make a dramatic escape.

This is a tale about another mysterious fire which involved my great uncle, Alfred Whitten.

My mothers Uncle Alf was one of two Methodist Ministers in his very religious family, the other being his older brother Albert.

Alfred Giles Whitten was born in 1883, the second last of Anthony and Charlotte's family of thirteen children. All the Whitten children had their early schooling at the little school their father built at "Lowestoft", the family property, and I Albert and Alfred appear to have received their theological training at the Central Methodist Mission's Evangelist's Training Home.



Albert and Alf third and fourth from left in second back row

By 1909, Alf was a Minister at Coolamon in the Riverina, and in 1910, he was on the North Coast where he made an impression at a Methodist rally in Grafton.

*No Plays, Dances or Cards.*

*The Rev. A. Whitten, speaking of 'Amusements' at a Methodist rally at Grafton, said he felt sure that God had intended His people to enjoy amusements. Some recreation and amusement was necessary for the youth of Australia, and they had no right to shut themselves in with a picket fence of dogma and creed; they must look out through the palings and see the wide world. There were many unhealthy amusements, however, and the speaker referred to so-called 'religious' plays. He believed that the great majority of actors and actresses were morally corrupt, and until they were cleansed the theatre was a place to be avoided. He also condemned dancing and cards, on the ground that although when properly conducted there was no harm in them, the strong-minded people should deny themselves such pleasures for the sake of their weaker brother and sisters, who had no sense of moderation.*

In 1912, Albert and Alf set off to see the world together. They visited the Holy Land, went to Europe and England and then to the family in Ireland. From there they travelled to America where they were enrolled at Drew Theological Seminary in Madison, New Jersey. Alf signed up for three months, then left for Canada and home, where the following year he married Ethel Cock.

In 1917, Alf and Ethel were welcomed to the Nambucca circuit of the Methodist church, and at some time in the next few years, Alf bought a disused sawmill at a little place called Warrell Creek and had it moved to Macksville. He paid 600 pounds for it and insured it with Mercantile Union insurers for 1423 pounds.

This is the building that burnt down, in December 1920.

There appears at first to have been not much excitement – just a small paragraph in the local paper on 24 December, but by February the coroner had concluded that the building's owner had a case to answer. Evidence had apparently been given that a tall man wearing a pith helmet had been seen at the scene – a description which might have fit Alf.

The story was taken up by newspapers all over the country with headlines like these in the Bathurst Times.

**CLERGYMAN COMMITTED FIRE IN A MILL**

**SENSATION IN THE NORTH MACKSVILLE**

And then, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of March, an anti-climax.

Maitland Daily Mercury (NSW : 1894 - 1939), Friday 18 March 1921, page 4

*THE MACKSVILLE FIRE. REV A.G. WHITTEN EXONERATED*

*"The Methodist" the official organ of the 'Methodist Church, publishes the following : — 'A week or two ago the daily newspapers gave wide publicity to the proceedings at a coroner's inquiry into the origin of a fire at Macksville and to the fact that the Rev. A G. Whitten was under accusation in respect, to that matter and was committed for trial. The accusation was a most serious one and has given the greatest pain to Mr Whitten and to all who have the honour of the Methodist Church at heart. We are glad now to be able to say that Mr Whitten's solicitors have received an official communication from the Attorney-General, who states that after a careful perusal of the depositions he was unable to find any evidence which would justify any charge being brought against Mr Whitten in connection with the burning down of the mill at Macksville, and also that the Attorney General had caused a telegram to be sent to the coroner at Macksville, in that effect. "You can take it," the solicitor's letter adds, "that any stigma which may have temporarily attached to you has now been entirely removed." It is a matter of satisfaction that in regard to this matter, Mr Whitten has been officially and completely exonerated."*

So, what really happened?

There are some questions. We know from "Trove" that Rev Whitten had been farewelled from the Nambucca circuit of the church in April 1919. I don't know where he was from then until he turned up in the Rylestone Kandos district (near Mudgee) in 1921. Was he really an "ex-Minister" during those two years, and still resident in the Nambucca area? There is a story in the family that he had Spanish flu at this time, and there is also an appearance before the Bankruptcy Registrar by "AG Whitten, grazier of Kempsey." (July 1921). Maybe he took time out to try being a farmer, like his brothers.

His daughter Beth was born in 1920 in Waratah, in the Newcastle area, and then Olwen was born in Kempsey in 1922 when he was still attached to the Rylestone circuit. Another mystery.

Described as "overworked and ill" he left Rylestone in 1923. It had been a tumultuous few years.

## **·FIRE AT MACKSVILLE.**

### **EX-METHODIST MINISTER CHARGED**

MACKSVILLE, Saturday.

The Coroner found, regarding the burning of the sawmill at Macksville, that on December 22 the premises were partially destroyed by fire, wilfully applied by Alfred Giles Whitten, who was committed for trial at the Kempsey Quarter Sessions, to be held on April 25 next, on the charge that he did maliciously set fire to the said sawmill. Bail was allowed, self in £200. The accused is an ex-Methodist minister.