Glenbrook Washaway 1906 Draft 12/18

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The following story has been collated from newspaper reports of the period. The story differed in the various reports

On Saturday March 24, 1906 a wild storm hit Sydney and its effects were felt hard at Glenbrook around 5-30 pm. Locals reported it was the worst storm ever experienced in this area. The lightening and hail were so severe that trees snapped with the force of the wind, branches and leaves were denuded from the remaining tree stumps. The hail was so heavy it penetrated iron roofs flooding the houses and large blocks of ice remained solid for a week after the storm. The thunder and lightening noise coupled with the raging torrent of water running down gullies and drains was deafening. It was said that there wasn’t a house in Glenbrook that wasn’t damaged in some way.

Mr John Salvana (1873-1956) an artist was completing an oil painting at Lucasville opposite Mr Colin Smith’s house (possibly “Logie” now the Sergeant’s mess at RAAF base). Donald owned “Mountside” which was nearby after purchasing it from Mr Colin Smith in 1904.) and was gathering up his material when he was invited by Mr Skarratt ( no first name given, however, we assume it was Donald) who was in charge of the house to shelter there until the storm passed. The storm intensity increased and the noise thunder and lightening was so deafening with the rain coming down in torrents they decided to go outside and have look at the devastation. To Mr Salvana’s surprise Mr Skarratt jumped the fence in front of them started running quickly down the hill over rocks and boulders with Mr Salvana following wondering what was going to happen. It was then that he saw a train climbing the hill from Penrith. It was then that the massive damage to the rail line at Willis Siding was evident. Mr Skarratt proceeded down the line to stop the train before it reached the damaged track by warning the driver Mr P Murray. About 10 chains of track had been washed away 100 yards east of the tunnel. There was a 3 feet gap under the track of missing material. The Willis Siding track had been raised up over the main line and falling over the bank on the other side. Boulders and rocks were everywhere and it was estimated that 3000 tons of dirt and rocks were deposited or missing over the site.

This where the story is confusing as it was stated that Mr Skarratt then proceeded to Glenbrook station to warn them of the damage. As there were two Skarratts involved (Donald and Thomas) we are not sure which brother did what in this incident. The train fireman Mr Jack Sinclair also struggled to Glenbrook Station to report the damage. This trip again was difficult with the storm damage. Once the news was passed on instructions were given for the train to back down to Emu Plains to clear the line for the repair crews. The repair story will be covered later.

It is here that the reports become confused. On March 30 1906 there appeared an article which stated

“A correspondent, writing with reference to .the recent washaway on the: railway line at Glenbrook, claims for Mr. Sinclair, fireman of the goods train which returned to Emu Plains, the credit of being the first to give warning of the danger. The correspondent, considers too much credit cannot be given to Messrs. Skarratt and Sinclair for their conduct. "Skarratt"; he adds, "is a cripple, (not sure which brother) having been run: over by a tram some time ago, and it was with great difficulty that he came down the mountain in such a storm and succeeded in stopping the goods train. The fireman then walked to Glenbrook and informed the stationmaster of the occurrence. In the teeth of such a gale, which one had to see to appreciate , the fireman undoubtedly took his own life in his hands, for he had to get through the torrent that was rushing across the line and walk over two skeleton bridges after he came out of the Lapstone tunnel. It will therefore be seen that this man saved the tourist train for Sydney from total destruction, for at the pace she would be travelling down through the tunnel it would have been impossible for the driver to have stopped, even had he seen the washaway, in time to avert disaster.”' Note there is again no mention of two” Skarratt” brothers being involved.

It was later pointed out by another report that there never was any danger to the mail train coming to Central from Glenbrook as it couldn’t proceed without the staff being passed on by the goods train leaving Penrith at 6-15 pm and the mail train leaving Sydney at 6-30 pm. The staff is essential for single line operation. Without the staff the train cannot operate on the line.

The washaway caused a backup of “Up” trains coming down the mountains and “Down” trains coming from Central. There was much discussion about the mail train held up at Springwood overnight as many of the second class passengers couldn’t afford food or accommodation. One letter to the editor complained about this lack of compassion, however, another refuted these complaints stating that the local residents helped the stationmasters, who acted on instructions from the district inspector in supplying hot coffee, tea and sandwiches. The railway left the gas on all night ( I assume that was for lights). Still it must have been uncomfortable spending the night in those dogbox carriages.

The repairs were soon underway. After receiving information about the problem a special train with about 50 men loaded with ashes and the usual equipment under charge of Mr W Pearce (traffic inspector) and Mr J Dews ( permanent way). Inspector Gulnane arrived at Penrith station to manage operations. It was getting busy at Penrith as “The Fish” had arrived causing more congestion. With the Knapsack telephone link now operational Mr Dews reported back to Mr Gulnane that the repairs would take at least 10 hours. This news soon spread resulting in movements of passengers using other means of transport or accommodation in hotels or train carriages.

A special train with 50 men under control of Mr Phil Roberts arrived at Penrith at 2 am and proceeded to the site. Mr Drews reported back that the track would be repaired at 6 am. This started the planning to get the delayed trains moving. The track was to be held to a 4 mph speed over the repaired section. The first Up train to arrive at Glenbrook met the brake down trains travelled up the repaired track. Roberts and Drews were still working on the main line until Sunday afternoon. In the daylight it became evident on how serious the damage was to the track and earthworks. Sections of the siding track with sleepers still attached hanging over the gully in all sorts of twisted shapes. As mentioned 3000 tons of earth were washed away. The 40 to 50 men worked between 4 and 5 o’clock before enjoying a large meal cooked at the site. Trains later picked them up for their trip home. Work continued on the site for another week.

The Railway Commissioner awarded Donald and Thomas Skarratt 25 Pounds each for the valuable service they rendered to the Department on that terrible day in possibly preventing an accident. Engraved medals were also presented to the brothers.

Now we come to the presentation of two engraved USA American Watch Company pocket watches to the Skarratts by Mr Henry Goodwin of Agincourt Potts Point. Mr Goodwin and his wife Roseanne who were passengers on one of the trains stopped from descending the mountains. The Goodwin’s owned a large house Crecy at Bathurst Road, Hazelbrook. Mr Goodwin was a little carried away when in his letter to the brothers he thought it was an action that deserved the Victoria Cross if it had been carried out in wartime. The watch presented to Thomas Skarratt is held in the Glenbrook & District Historical Society Inc collection. It is believed that Mr Donald Skarratt’s medal and watch had been stolen.

People Involved

Thomas Carleton Skarratt born in 1853 is the oldest son while Donald Frederick Skarrett born 1873 the youngest son of William Carleton and Frances Mary Fanny Skarratt (nee Weale) of Kington Herefordshire England. They migrated to Sydney in 1874 with their eight children. A daughter Louisa Australia Skarratt was born at St George NSW in 1876, however didn’t survive.

Donald Skarratt spent some time in Queensland at the Claverton Downs Station. He purchased “Mountside” in Glenbrook in 1904 from Mr Colin Smith and lived there all his life. He married Elizabeth Norris in 1914. Elizabeth had been listed in the 1906 Electoral Roll as “house helper’ at Ulinbawn Glenbrook. The house was badly damaged in the 1946 bushfires and a new tile roof was installed. He was very involved in civic matters and was a councillor on the Blue Mountains Council for 21 years. He died at “Mountside” in 1948. He had two children Donald who lived at Narromine and Eric who was a well known Glenbrook Architect.

Thomas Carleton Skarratt was living at Ulinbawn Glenbrook at this time and his occupation was listed as “assayer’ probably at the Mt. Morgan mine owned by his cousin Walter Russell Hall. He married Esther Caroline Page in 1907 who was a barmaid at a hotel where he was the publican. His final property was at Lakeside near Thirlmere. He died in 1929 at Picton.

Henry and Roseanne Goodwin as mentioned lived at Agincourt Potts Point and owned a large property “Crecy”, Bathurst Road, Hazelbrook. Mr Goodwin and his father were involved in the vehicle manufacture trade. He died on October 21,1914.

John Salvana 1873-1956) Artist, Draughtsman and Painter.

Born in Ironbark (now Stuart Town) NSW and studied art at the Sydney Royal Art Society in 1897 and also in London. The NSW Art Gallery have 7 of his paintings in their collection. He was a impressionistic landscape artist who travelled around NSW. He is buried in the Yarramalong Cemetery

“J. Salvana was a painter. At a Smoke Night for the Art Society of NSW in September 1897, it was reported: 'But to draw lightning sketches, with all the disadvantages of brown paper, in front of a gallery of critics, and gain not only a favourable verdict but a storm of cheers – that is something of which to be proud; and so Messrs A.R. Coffey, Perry, Spence, Leon Pole, G. Taylor , and Salvana are to be complimented on that often mentioned but seldom realised event – an artistic success’ “ (Sydney Morning Herald 13 September 1897, 3).