

BABINDA CYCLONE- 10th March 1979

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In 1918 Babinda was a relatively new town. While some residences were substantially constructed by skilled tradesmen such as Arthur Pell, other homes had been built by their owners who possessed bushmen's skills, and lacked the inbuilt cyclone resistance, which has been developed over recent years. Materials used were mainly timber and galvanized iron.

The original township site was on the south side of Babinda Creek, but, with the site chosen for the mill, being in its present position, the township was built around the factory area. For some years many huge stumps remained in the town's area; some along the railway line.

Associated with Babinda are two dates indelibly stamped on my mind. One is the 10th March 1918; and the other the 6th March 1956.

On the 10th March 1918, Babinda was devastated by a cyclone, without doubt one of the most severe to visit the north east coast of Queensland during the present Century. On the 6th March 1956, the town suffered another cyclone of less severity but, on that morning my father who had contributed so much to alleviate distress caused by the "blow" in 1918, died in the Babinda Hospital.

Early in 1918, my father (Bill Johnston) then Superintendent of the Babinda Centre, Queensland Ambulance Transport Brigade, moved his family from temporary premises into newly constructed quarters. This structure was on the then orthodox design, consisting of two stories and built of timber with a galvanised iron roof. The ground floor provided the plant room with concrete floor, where the Ambulance car was kept. There was a casualty room and office and bearer's room. The second story consisted of living quarters, which for six weeks prior to the cyclone, were used by our family. On this floor was a front verandah, and a short side verandah parallel to the mill tramline. The staircase gave access from the ground floor to this side verandah.

Just prior to the cyclone, ballast trains had stock-piled sand between the Ambulance side picket fence and the two foot Sugar Mill gauge tramline. The pile would have been about a metre high. It was to prove an asset during the storm.

At this time our family consisted of our parents, and four children. I was the eldest at twelve years of age. A teenage cousin, May Kirkbride, recently arrived from Stannary Hills, was with us also.

At about ten o'clock on Sunday morning, the 10th March 1918, we noticed that the wind began to blow in gushes and with increasing strength. During the day the velocity increased, and by late afternoon, timber and iron was wrenched from the State Hotel roofing, and some of it was carried to shower the roof of the Ambulance Centre. Then we heard that the Catholic Church had blown down, and shortly afterwards that the Church of England had collapsed. At that time the School of Arts was housed in a rectangular building with a gable roof. It stood behind the present School of Arts; close to the police paddock fence.

Before dark we witnessed this building being razed to the ground. Meanwhile, realising that Babinda was facing a torrid experience, our Mother had removed photographs from the walls, and packed away other fragile objects. We also had our meal; and put on warm clothing. My father had been going out into the storm to ascertain how many families were faring; and maintaining close contact with the police. By nightfall the full fury of the cyclone became apparent. The house had been swaying and shuddering, flying debris from the town's business section could be heard crashing into buildings. We moved downstairs into the bearer's

room; and could hear the destruction of the living quarters taking place. My Dad went down to the police station, and enroute was blown off his feet. The sergeant's residence was standing. Dad fought his way against the wind back to the family; and sometime about then I remember, the school teacher's mother, Mrs Hall and Bill Ball, her son on a holiday joined us, Then the back wall of the bearer's room began to move and opened to about one foot at the top wall plate. My father decided that our place was no longer safe; and that we should shelter with the sergeant of police. Fortunately the front doors of the plant room were jammed; for as we reached them, railings and timber, began falling from the front verandah onto the ground floor, it could have been disastrous; and later I often thought that was the time when I was really afraid.

We went to the back of the plant room. In a group we ran to the side fence and huddled at the base of the pailings, sheltered by the stock pile of sand. My Dad knelt a few feet behind us with a torch; as sheets of flying iron were about to crash into the fence to our vicinity he would warn us. The force of the wind drove the sand into our hair and clothing; but, the sandbank proved a refuge which protected all from injury. Then came a short lull in the storm, and again the wind began. It lifted the well constructed stable and feed room off its low blocks and landed upside down on its roof with a gigantic bang.

By eleven o'clock it was all over; perhaps the greatest intensity was about eight o'clock.

The Lindgren family relatives of ours now joined us; they lived in the mill yard and with others had taken shelter in the mill, which had lost some roofing iron.

We children were taken to the Sergeant's residence and packed into his double bed, after being stripped of our clothing. I shall never forget, everytime I wakened during the night, I saw my Aunt Mrs. Lindgren sitting at the bedside with her head in her hands. The family had been hard hit. There was much distress in the township.

During the storm, some families made their way to the mill for shelter, others sheltered behind big tree stumps along the railway line. A string of coupled railway carriages at the station had been blown onto their sides. As people realized the cyclone had passed, neighbours began cooe-ing to each other to establish their whereabouts. There was not much cheer, the devastation was almost total. Some houses along Parry Street remained standing. The State School had shifted on its blocks, but remained to act as a food depot.

My Dad and Syd Smith's father visited home sites, to ascertain if there were serious injuries requiring attention. Miraculously there were no fatalities.

There were numerous injuries caused during the night after the storm, as people began to move around and ran into galvanized iron sheets, some driven into the ground at an angle of 45 degrees. Throughout the night and during the following day a string of patients made their way to the Ambulance for dressing and the re-dressings, my father went through a couple of nights without sleep. A bearer from Cairns Ambulance Centre was sent to assist.

Daylight revealed the extent of the damage; the town was in ruins. Families began clearing away the collapsed houses, to recover foodstuffs and clothing. I remembered being taken to John Dan's shop, and from under a collapsed wall, a flannel shirt was extracted – to be “put on the bill”.

The next couple of nights my brother and I slept in the mill under the care of the Lindgren family, many homeless families sought shelter there. A relief committee was formed immediately, and relief food and clothing poured into Babinda from other northern towns. My father was the Secretary of the committee.

My brother and I were sent into our Uncle (Jack Johnson) at the Gordonvale Ambulance Centre for a short period until a temporary shelter of galvanized iron walls were erected in the ambulance yard. We had a sand floor. There we lived until a low set cyclone proof Ambulance Centre was constructed. In these premises my father served out the remainder of his working life.