

1942 FLOODS

ACCORDING TO the *Daily News-Mail* of Monday February 16, 1942, the flooding of Bundaberg 'came like a bolt from the blue'.

Bundaberg had been suffering through one of the severest droughts for a decade, followed by heavy rain at the end of January which topped up creeks and watercourses, and resulted in minor flooding in the upper part of the Burnett.

On Sunday February 8, heavy falls were recorded from Bundaberg to the Burnett Valley and hinterland. While rain eased in Bundaberg, the deluge continued in the Upper Burnett, with the Gayndah flood warning station reporting that the river was rising at the rate of twelve inches an hour.

THE EARLY WARNINGS

An anxious few days followed, but on Thursday 12 February, the water levels plateaued at 31 ft 10 inches at the Bundaberg wharves. The relief was shortlived, as by the following Tuesday Bundaberg was informed that the river in the Upper Burnett was in high flood and the bridge between Eidsvold and Monto was 26 ft under water.

It was obvious that flooding would occur in Bundaberg, and evacuation warnings were issued to all residents early on the morning of Wednesday 18 February.

The police, under the direction of Sub-Inspector J.J. Osborne, quickly began using all available transport to assist in evacuating residents, and were joined later in the morning by the Air Force personnel stationed in Bundaberg.

THE EVACUATION

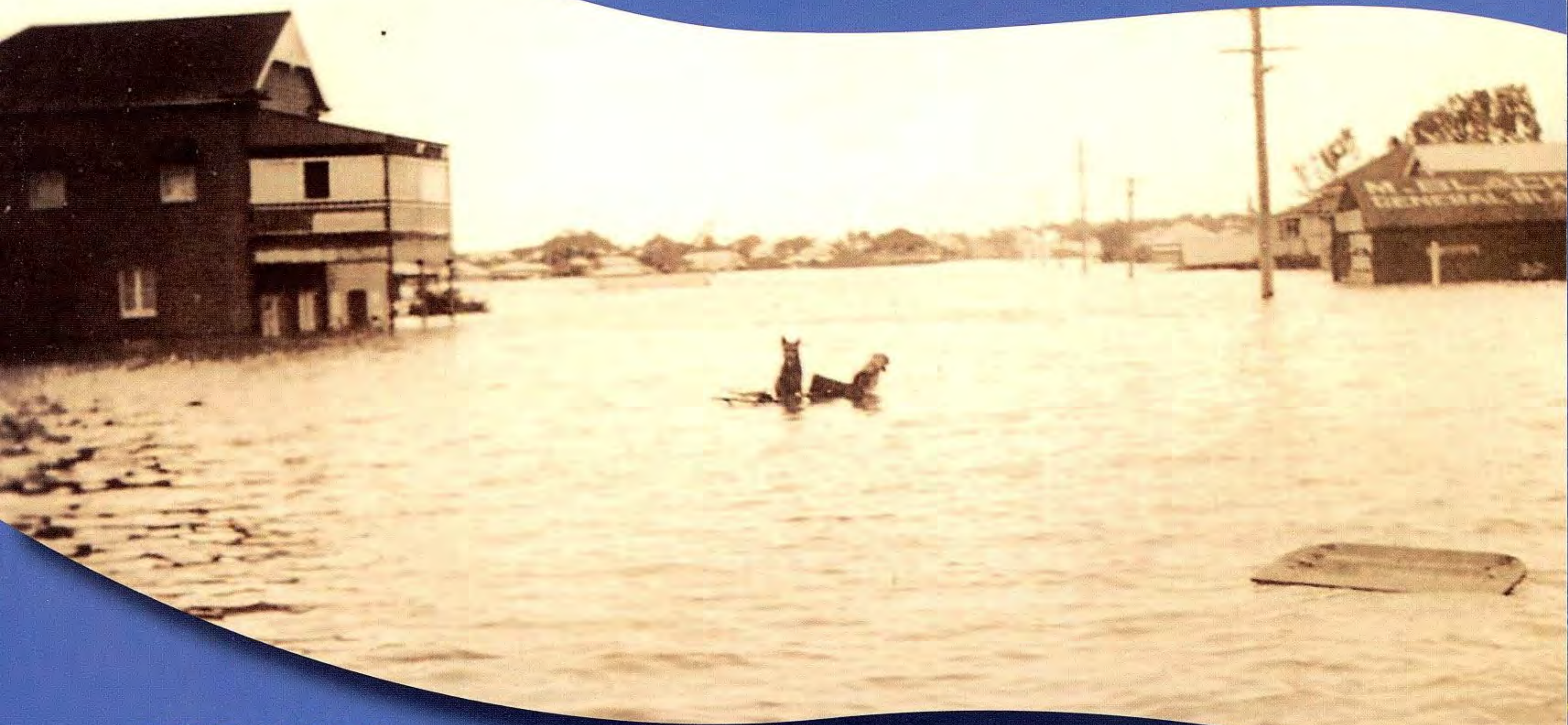
By now the Burnett River had reached a level where the waters began to flood into the lower lying suburbs on the south side, and boats were then used to continue the evacuation. Fearing the river might break the banks at North Bundaberg as well, the police moved to clear the residents from their homes. By nightfall, the river breached the northern bank above the railway station, and simultaneously overflowed into Perry Street.

North Bundaberg School, on School Hill, became the refuge through the night for many residents as Hinkler Avenue went under water and boats became essential for transport. It was during the night that

a fatality occurred—RAAF Aircraftsman Francis Tippett, 21, drowned when a rescue boat capsized in Hanbury Street. The other occupants managed to make it to shore after fighting the fast moving current, but Tippett was last seen being swept into the water.

His body was found two days later in a cane field about half a mile from the bridge.

on Wednesday night, while it was estimated another 1500 people were given shelter by friends and relatives. The Church of England Parish Hall set up small cubicles using stage curtains and polling booth screens to allow privacy for families, while many other facilities arranged stools and chairs to allow children some room to sleep. As more families arrived at the halls throughout the night, dining tables were



THE FLOODING

Most of Bundaberg on both sides of the river was flooded by Thursday. The reservoirs at East Bundaberg were under water, and in South Bundaberg the Melbourne Hotel was inundated up to the second floor. The wharf sheds were washed away on Wednesday afternoon, and during the night additional sheds on the wharf area were carried off by the river.

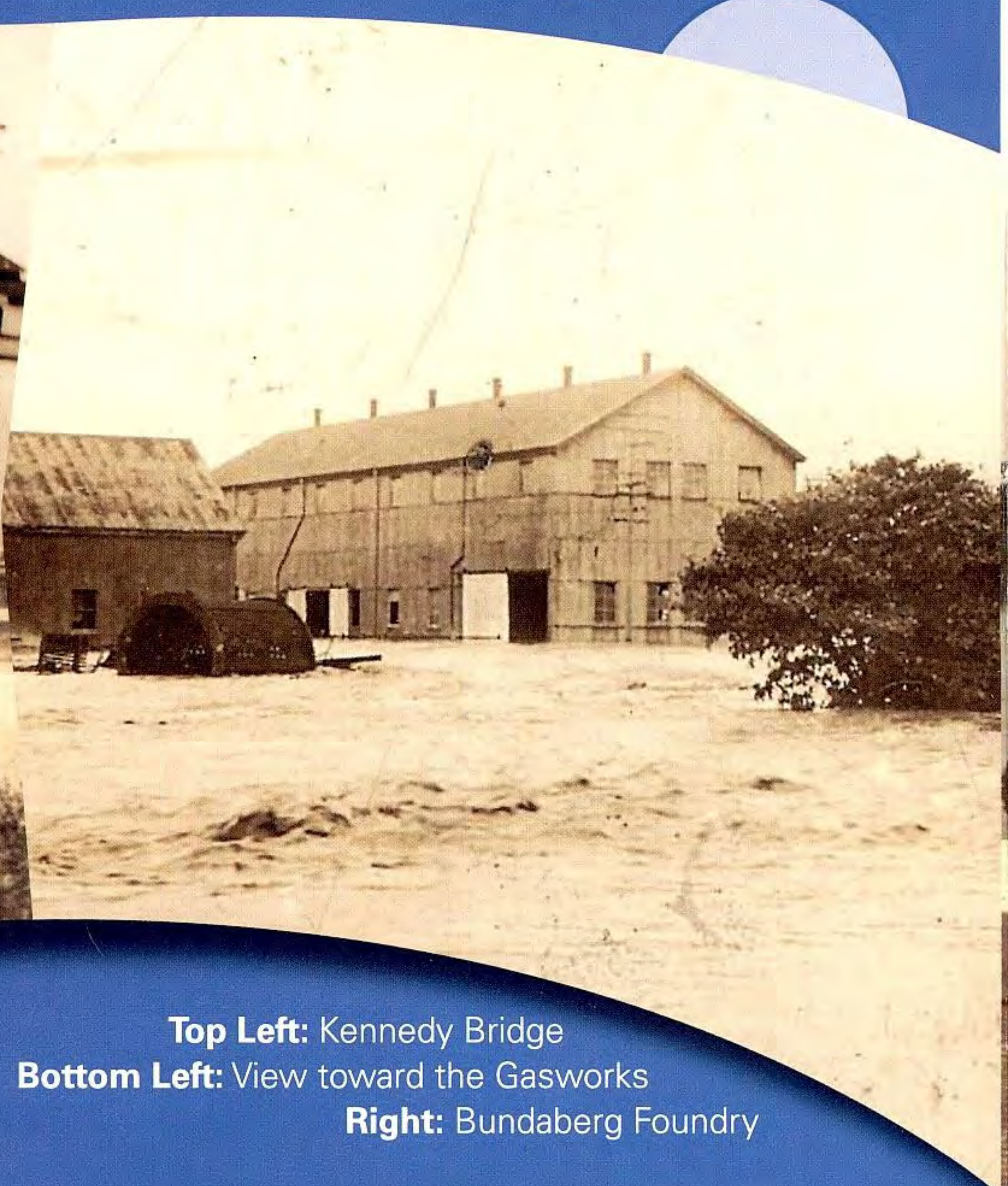
At Fairymead Plantation the river bank overflowed on Wednesday afternoon, and the water spread rapidly over the fields. Many of the women and children living on the plantation were evacuated into the mill, and spent two days up in the mill lofts while the river raged below. At the height of the flooding, water covered the tops of the cane fields for miles.

In the town, various halls, churches and gyms were used to house over 500 people

Above: Gympie Hotel, Targo Street

cleared to provide room for beds, and hot meals were served standing as a result.

In East Bundaberg, police and volunteers helped move furniture and treasured possessions from houses as the flood waters rose. Some residents knocked holes in their ceilings and moved goods up into the roof spaces, while others used wire and rope to hang furniture from the rafters. When the river broke above Millaquin, families were taken in boats to East Bundaberg State School. As it was after school hours, rescuers had to break into the school to gain access. The school was surrounded by water during the night, but people remained safe and dry in the buildings.



THE INDIVIDUAL STORIES

During the 1942 Floods, many stories of courage, sadness, humour and plain eccentricity were reported in the Bundaberg Daily News-Mail:

■ Residents of North Bundaberg raised over £80 for a memorial to Airman Francis Tippett, who drowned helping in the evacuation of North Bundaberg.

■ In Gayndah, Postmaster E. Gardiner waded through floodwaters and climbed a telegraph pole, then tied himself to the cross-piece. He proceeded to send over 100 telegrams using a portable transmitter. They weren't urgent messages for help – he just didn't want a backlog of telegraphs piling up.

■ The first people rescued at East Bundaberg were Mrs Bun Yung and her son. The waters rose so quickly when the river breached its bank at Millaquin Mill, rescuers found the Bun Yungs waist deep in water in the front room of their home.

Top Left: Kennedy Bridge

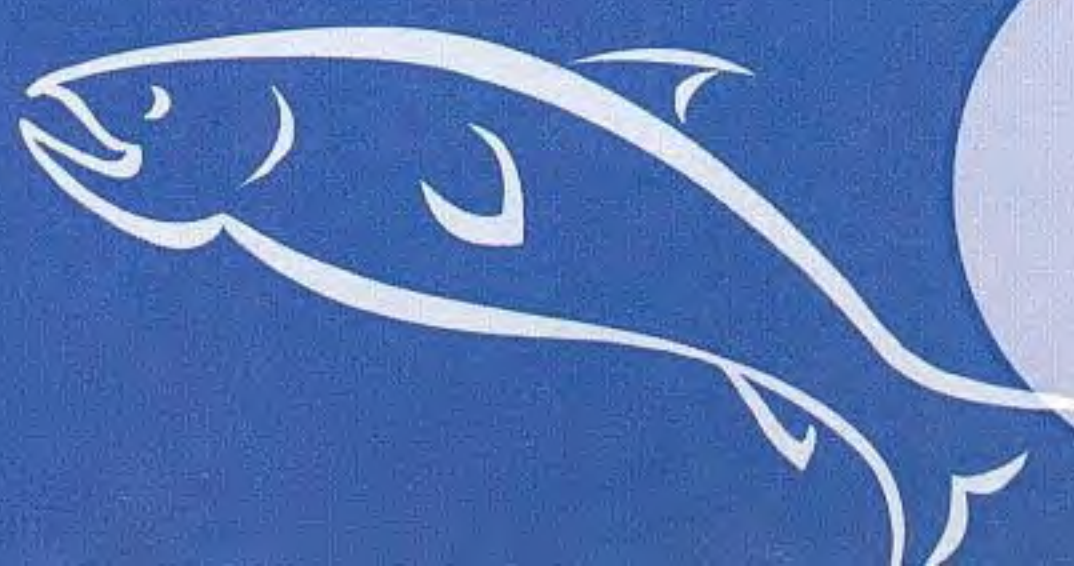
Bottom Left: View toward the Gasworks

Right: Bundaberg Foundry

■ Deputy Mayor Ald. T. Dexter had stern words for the people of Bundaberg regarding rumours that raw sewage was floating in the flood waters. He advised that the nasty smell throughout the city was due to the mixture of fresh and salt water causing decay of weeds. His final advice – “contrary to public opinion smells do not cause disease”.

■ The most commonly requested household items to save, according to evacuation workers in East Bundaberg, were sewing machines or wirelesses.

■ A piano was carried two chains (40 metres) through waist deep flood waters to a truck, after a distressed woman explained to rescuers that it had taken years to save for it.

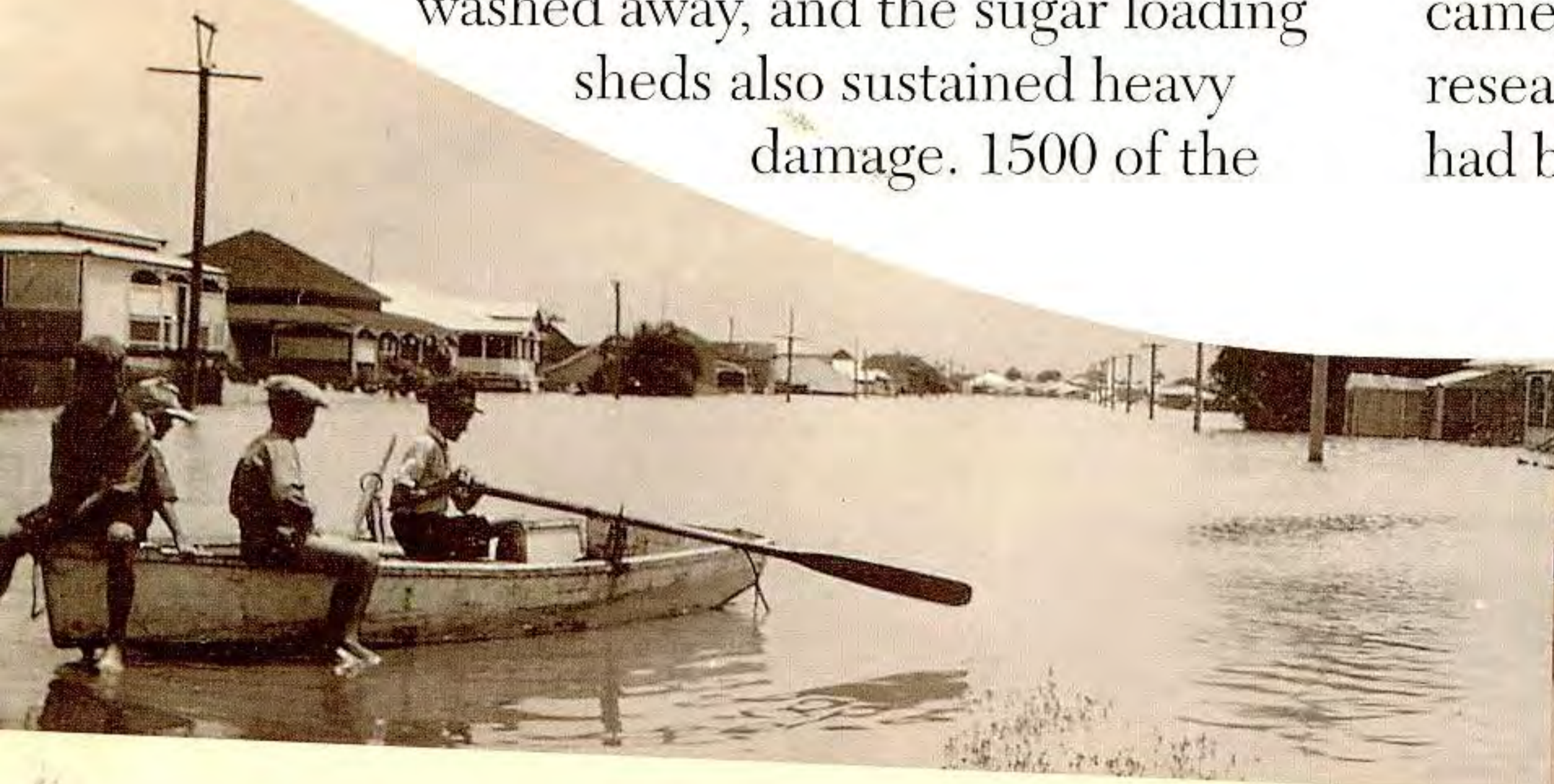


THE AFTERMATH

By Saturday 21 February, the flood waters had receded somewhat, and the damage to Bundaberg and surrounding areas could be assessed. The wharves were extensively damaged, many of them completely washed away, and the sugar loading sheds also sustained heavy damage. 1500 of the

WAS IT THE BIGGEST FLOOD?

Over the years, residents have debated whether the 1942 floods exceeded the 1890 or 1893 floods. The newspaper reported that in 1890, floodwaters reached the top balcony of the Melbourne Hotel, while in 1942 they came four feet below the balcony. Further research revealed that the Melbourne Hotel had been moved back about 15 feet onto



4500 tons of sugar stored at Fairymead were lost, and thousands of tons of cane were washed away from surrounding farms. The cotton crop was destroyed, and the cost of cleaning slime and mud from the mill and plantation would amount to thousands of pounds. Many farmers from Bundaberg to Mundubbera lost most of their livestock and crops, and also suffered damage to machinery and buildings.

The City Council made a survey of the city, and reported that there was very little serious damage. Telephone services were disrupted as cables failed, and the gasworks was out of operation for a week as the furnaces flooded, but the biggest task would be clearing streets and buildings of mud and debris as soon as possible, and helping residents relocate back to their houses.

Top Left: Hunter Street

Bottom Left: Rowing Shed and Saltwater Creek

Top Right: North Bundaberg

Bottom Right: Hanbury Street, North Bundaberg

higher ground since 1890, and put on blocks, so the 1942 floodwaters may win the day.

Many thanks to Beryl Darnell, Daph Gilbert and Jean Moore for providing photos of the 1942 floods.

References

Bundaberg Daily News-Mail, February 16 – February 21, 1942

Sue Gammon

—Bundaberg Library